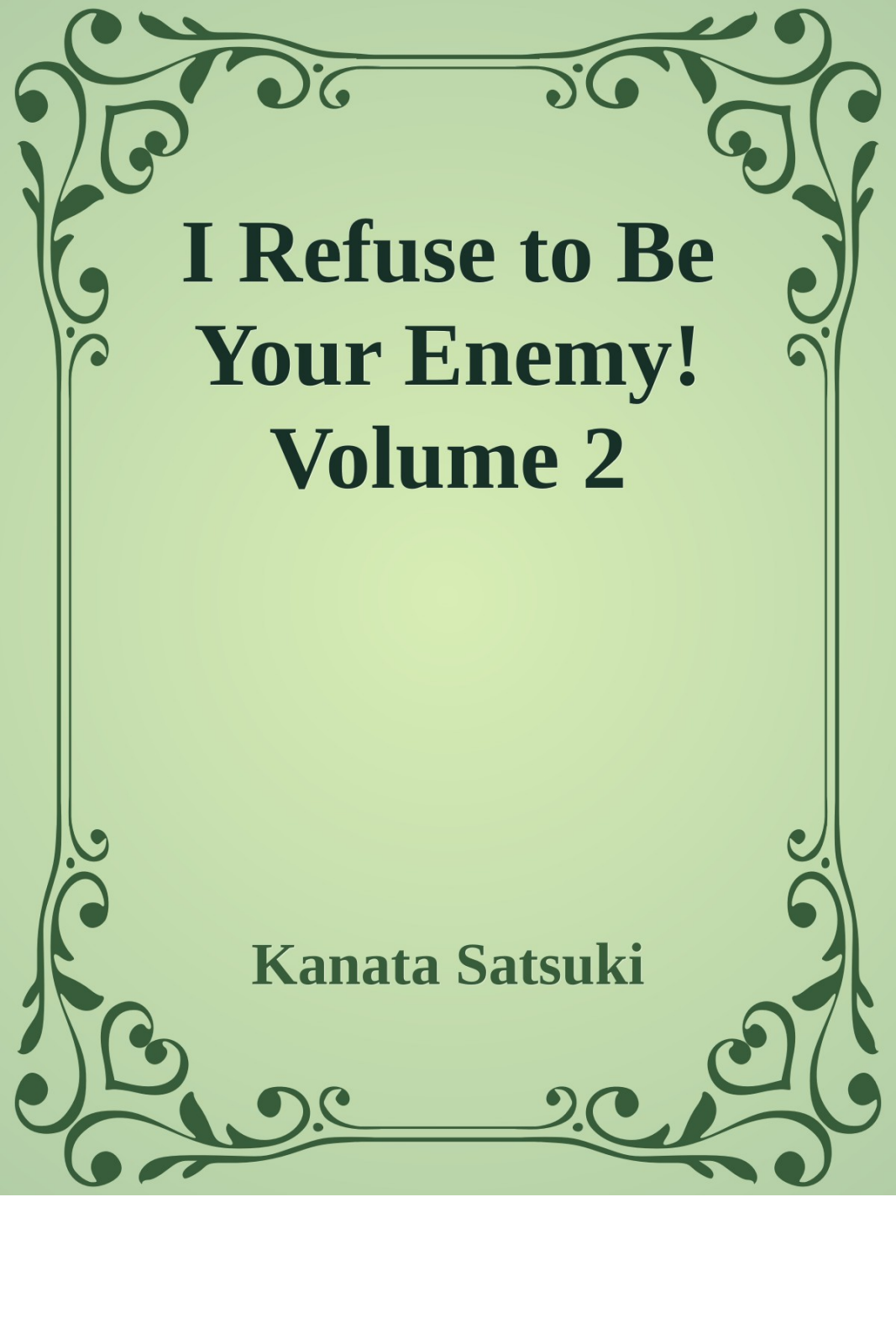


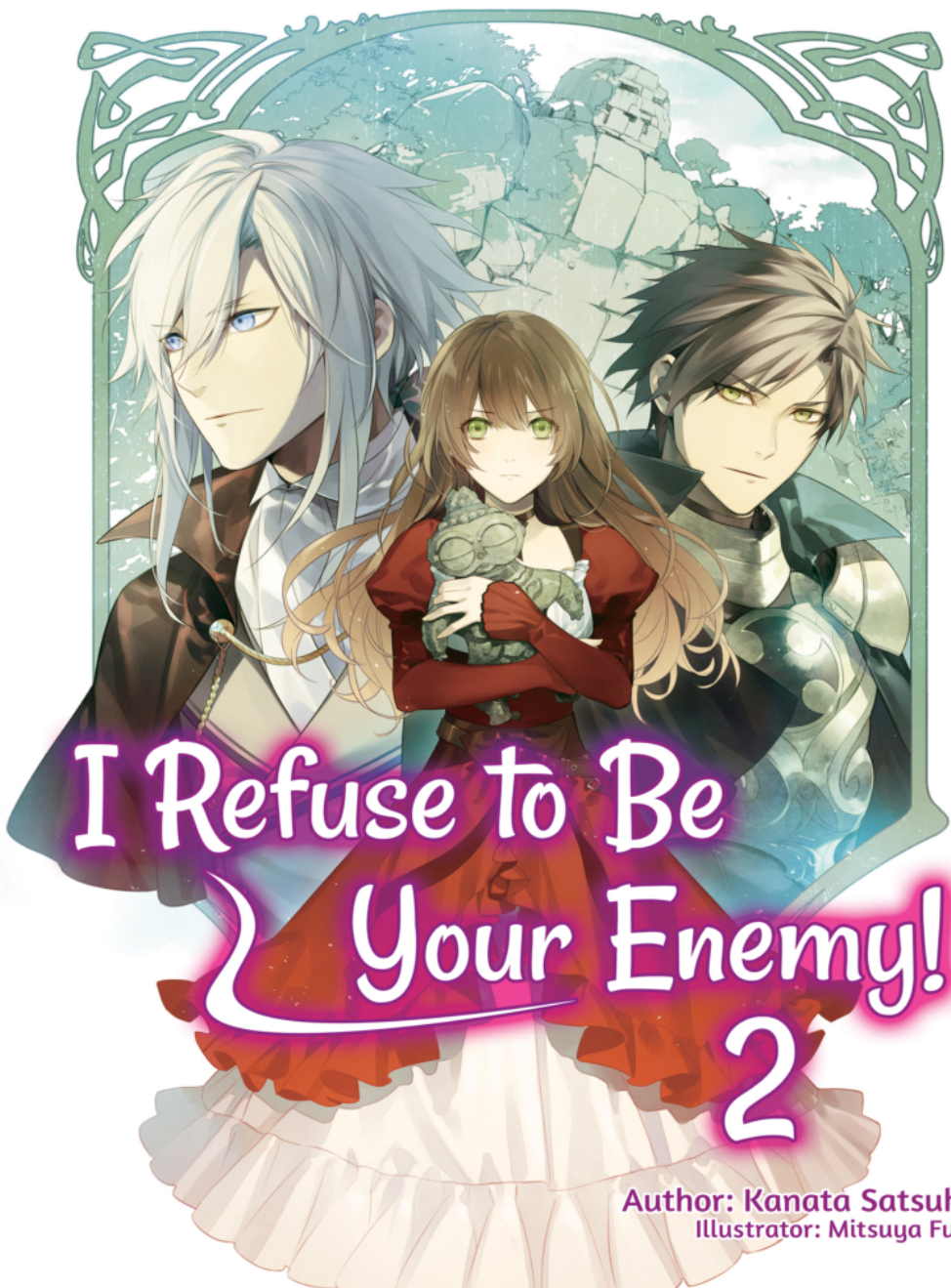


I Refuse to Be Your Enemy! Volume 2

Kanata Satsuki

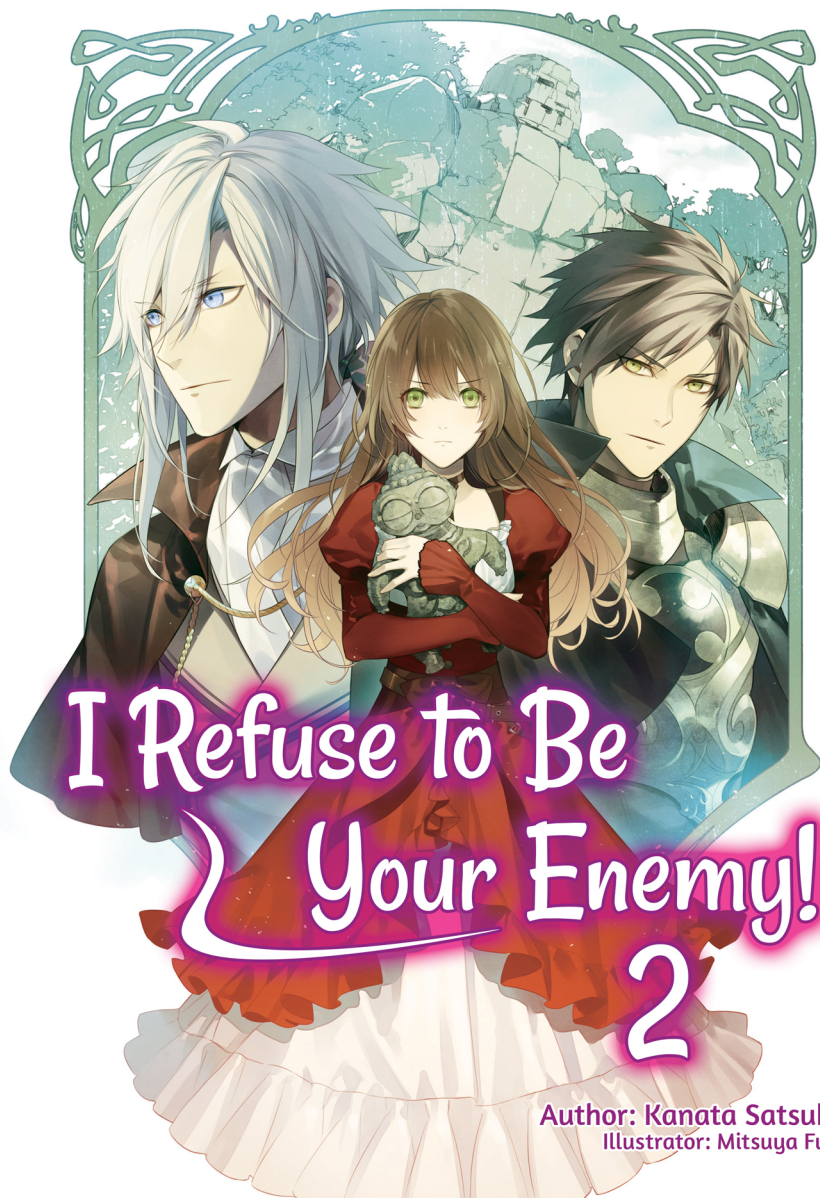
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Author: Kanata Satsuki
Illustrator: Mitsuya Fuji



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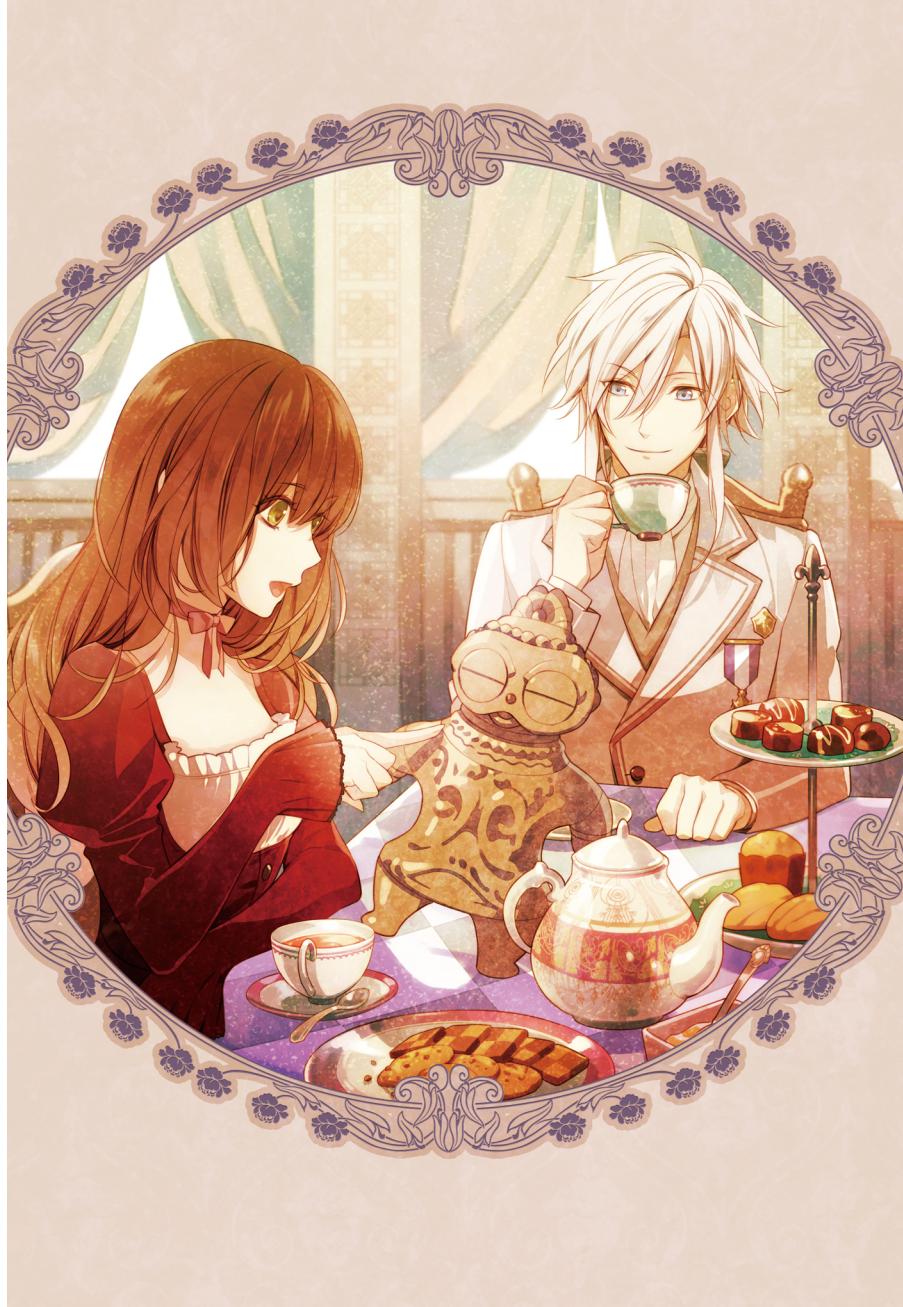




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Chapter 1: Counterattack on the Hills of Dilhorne

When I came to, I was staring up at a stone ceiling. As I blinked, it all came back to me bit by bit—where I had just been, what I'd been doing, and what I had seen.

Suddenly, it felt hard to breathe.

I'd fought because I had to. I knew I was the only one who could pull it off, so I was never struck with the urge to run away. But ultimately, my actions had amounted to the deaths of many, many people.

The castle was safe. And we'd managed to save the margrave, at that. Still, I couldn't find it in me to rejoice that everything had gone so smoothly. Every time I closed my eyes, all I could see were corpses, corpses, and more corpses.

"Are you awake, Kiara?" I heard a gentle voice call out.

Someone was sitting beside me. When I turned my head, I found it was Lady Évrard's attendant, Maya.

The room was dimly lit; the only source of light was a single candle placed atop a small table. The look on Maya's face, illuminated by the orange glow of the candlelight, told me she was exhausted. Her brown hair was falling loose from the neat bun she always wore to keep it out of the way.

"How...?"

How many hours had I been asleep? Last I remembered, the Llewynian forces still had the castle surrounded. What happened after that? Was everyone okay? I wanted to ask, but my voice was so hoarse I couldn't get the words out. Upon noticing my struggle, Maya sat me up in bed and handed me a glass of water poured from the carafe at her side. Once I'd quenched my thirst, I finally found my voice again.

"How long have I been asleep?"

"About three hours. It's past nightfall now."

"What happened to the Llewynian—"

I opened my mouth to keep firing off questions, but after taking the empty glass from me and setting it down on the table, Maya cut me off with a hug.

"Don't worry; you saved us. The Llewynian soldiers have fallen back."

I slowly started to relax. *At least I really managed to make a*

difference, I thought.

But Maya's next words chilled me to the bone. "You slew their general."

"Slew..."

"The enemy's chain of command is in chaos, it seems. They've no choice but to cease their attack for now."

All because I'd crushed him underfoot with my golem.

I had been so terrified of what I had been doing that I hadn't even looked at the enemies' faces. I remembered being surrounded by knights, some of them dressed in particularly striking jackets. I'd zeroed in on those men, assuming that if I just took *them* out, their forces would pull back before I had to kill even more soldiers. Maya knew for a fact that I'd slain him, so Cain must have been watching—since I hadn't had the guts to make sure of it myself.

"His Lordship has returned safely as well. Thank you, Kiara. Truly."

Maya gave me one last squeeze, then told me she'd let everyone know I was up and left the room.

Everything felt like a blur.

Apparently, I'd done something commendable. So why couldn't I feel the least bit happy about it? The only thing I felt at the moment was tired.

There was a knock on my door, but any reply I could have mustered got caught in my throat. I didn't have the energy to so much as lift my head.

Despite my lack of a response, I heard whomever it was step inside. As they silently walked over to me, I wondered who it could be, but I couldn't be bothered to look up and see.

The moment they sat down in the same chair Maya had just been sitting in, they wrapped me up in an embrace that made it impossible to keep ignoring their presence. I caught a glimpse of a familiar pale military uniform and a whiff of a scent I recognized.

"Reg—"

"You don't have to force yourself to say anything. As long as you don't mind staying like this, that is. Oh, however," Reggie added, a little mischief in his voice, "I *am* of the mind to bully you, enough for each year you took off my life. I waited a terribly long time for you to wake up, you see."

So he said, but given the way he was gently rubbing my back, I didn't feel terribly bullied. I could almost feel the warmth of his hands melting away the tension that reached all the way to the bottom of my spine.

The touch of Reggie's hands felt oddly familiar; it brought back memories of when my mother had coddled me in my past life. Perhaps

that was why I found myself slumping against Reggie before I even realized it.

When I did, he scooped up my left hand in his.

"It's too bad you've become a spellcaster, but that's the way it is. In all honesty, I never wanted you to gamble with your life like that, but it was your own choice to make, and you were so sure you could do it."

Delivering his words almost like a soliloquy, Reggie placed a kiss on one of my fingertips. I jolted at the soft sensation as it graced my forefinger.

"The reinforcements I arranged for aren't likely to arrive until the day after tomorrow. I never predicted that Llewyn would join hands with Salekhard, given their recent quarrels. I have only my own lack of foresight to blame."

He lightly nipped at my fingertip in some sort of expression of his frustration. Along with the sweet rush of pain, I grew flustered, at a complete loss as to why he would do such a thing.

"Hey, Reggie!"

Next, he pressed his lips to the center of my palm. I sucked in a breath as he tickled my skin.

Wait a second! We're supposed to be FRIENDS, right? I'm pretty sure friends don't do things like nibble each other's fingers and kiss each other's hands!

I thought back to what had happened yesterday when we'd held each other close right before the meeting. I'd been so desperate to get Reggie to see things my way, to get his blessing, that I'd ended up getting way too close to him.

With no regard for my inner turmoil, Reggie went on in an eerily calm voice, "I understand your actions up to the point that you saved the margrave. But past that, I wish you'd had a little more regard for your own safety. You spotted me atop the castle walls. Why didn't you ask me to send out more soldiers so we could rescue him together? Why didn't you have any faith in me? Am I truly so unreliable?"

Reggie placed a tender kiss on the inside of my wrist.

"Don't..." A chill ran up my spine.

"You don't like it?"

Reggie looked so forlorn as he gazed into my eyes, I couldn't bring myself to tell him to stop. "Um, it's less that I don't like it, and more that you're freaking me out a little..."

"Is it *me* you don't like?"

"What? No, of course not. I could never dislike you. Never."

All the way down to the deepest depths of my heart, I didn't hold a scrap of ill will towards Reggie. I was simply embarrassed.

"Why must you say things like that? If only you *did* hate me, then

perhaps embracing you would be enough to make you listen to me.”

“Are you saying you *want* me to hate you? But why?”

“Because I don’t want you to push yourself, but that doesn’t seem to be getting through to you at all. If Wentworth hadn’t been with you, you could have been cast into the middle of the Llewynian army right in the heat of battle.”

He had a point. If Cain hadn’t been there to support me, it would’ve taken all my strength just to hang on to the golem’s shoulder, and my magic would have burned out partway through. If the enemy found the spellcaster who killed so many of their comrades collapsed alone on the battlefield, they might have done a lot worse than skewer me with a thousand swords.

As he watched the color drain from my face, Reggie seemed satisfied that I finally understood what he was getting at and continued, “You need to think before you act. Have you ever imagined what could happen if a lone woman was thrown out into enemy troops, where no one could immediately rush to your rescue? I’ve been thinking of ways to stop you from treating your own life so carelessly.”

Reggie was totally right; I had been too reckless. Thus, I braced myself for a lecture, but what I got was something entirely different.

After repositioning himself next to my foot, Reggie grabbed hold of my ankle from over the blanket. My eyes nearly popped out of my head.

“What are you doing?!”

“Perhaps if I abase myself before you, you’ll finally listen to my pleas.”

Reggie pulled away the part of the blanket covering just the tips of my toes and lowered his head toward the instep of my foot. *Oh god, please don’t tell me he’s planning to give it the same treatment as my hand!*



“Hey, wait! You can’t do that! You’re a prince, for goodness’ sake!”

Besides, making a guy kneel and kiss my feet is NOT a fantasy of mine!

“But you see, you won’t listen if I ask normally.”

When Reggie cast his eyes downward, dejected, I nearly gave in...
But nope! I’m not letting you get away with this one!

“Look, I’m sorry! You’re right and I was wrong, so just don’t do THAT!”

My foot still in Reggie’s clutches, I screamed with all my might. But before the deed was done, Reggie lifted his head, and pointed out with an unfazed expression, “You know, if you keep struggling, you might kick off the blanket and show me your whole leg.”

“So just let go of me! Problem solved!”

As my yells became more and more desperate, Reggie chuckled. “Then how about this? Repeat after me, and I’ll stop: ‘Next time, I’ll be sure to call on your help.’”

“O-Okay, okay. I’ll say it...”

Once he’d let go of my leg, I did as Reggie asked, my shoulders heaving as I tried to breathe again.

“Still, it’s a fact that many of our people owe you their lives. Everyone’s taken to calling you a hero. Good for you, Kiara. You accomplished everything you’d hoped for; you must be pleased.”

“I wouldn’t say that...”

That comment hit me like a sucker punch, and I was so busy catching my breath that I couldn’t even put up a happy façade. But as soon as I said it, I was struck with a realization: *I can’t say I’m not happy. I’ll just be putting a damper on everyone else’s joy.*

I was clearly the weird one for not feeling glad about it. Yet every time I tried to say otherwise, I couldn’t manage to get the words out of my mouth.

After a stretch of silence, Reggie murmured, “I see. So *that’s* what’s bothering you.” Given his reaction, he’d probably figured it out on his own. “Maya told me you were behaving strangely, and now I see what she meant. Why aren’t you happy, Kiara?”

“Maybe there’s just something wrong with me, but killing people isn’t something I can just... get over.”

“You feel guilty?” he asked, and I nodded.

I couldn’t shake the feeling I had done something truly despicable. In an RPG, it was easy to “beat” the enemy, but in reality, that action equated to murder.

As a daughter of the count, I’d lived a life far removed from any bloodshed, so my sense of morality was likely a holdover from my

past life.

“It’s nothing for you to feel bad about. After all, if you hadn’t killed them, they might have killed you.” Reggie excused my actions for me.

He wasn’t wrong, of course. No matter how much it pained me to kill people, not being able to save Reggie or Lord Évrard would have been even worse. In order to protect them, someone else had to be sacrificed. Only some sort of genius could figure out a way around that, and I was no genius.

That didn’t change the fact that I didn’t *want* to kill people. I managed not to think about it when I was focused on surviving, but once the danger to my life was gone, I couldn’t take it. My whole body shook with the knowledge that I’d ended another person’s life. And no matter how bad I felt about it, I had no way to take responsibility for my actions. The guilt over the horrible things I’d done felt like a weight bearing down on my chest, ready to crush me.

“If that isn’t enough to alleviate your conscience, then let’s say *I’m* responsible for the deaths of the men you killed.”

“But I don’t want *you* to take on that weight, either.”

“It isn’t a heavy burden for me to bear,” Reggie asserted. “It’s my duty as someone who was born into royalty. Whenever we declare war, we must be prepared both to kill and to watch our own men die. I’ve grown used to it, so there’s no need for you to worry for my sake.”

I didn’t know what to say. I had no idea that Reggie had been thinking about war that way. It finally dawned on me that commanding officers weren’t all people dodging responsibility from afar.

A single order of his could send his men to their deaths. Since Reggie had the final call when it came to strategic decisions, if he didn’t think everything through properly, he would be directly responsible if his forces met a grisly end.

Still, just because he’s used to it doesn’t mean it can’t hurt him.

“You see, Kiara? This is why I was so opposed to you standing in the line of fire. You have good intuition. You’re resourceful, too. But for better or for worse, you’re just an ordinary girl. I knew how hard it would be for you to be subjected to the horror of a kill-or-be-killed scenario.” Reggie had anticipated that things would turn out this way, and that was why he had tried to stop me. “You can’t bear the weight of this burden. That’s why I didn’t want you to become a spellcaster... even if your doing so would allow me to survive.”

There wasn’t much I could say to that. After all, Reggie had objected to my ambitions after taking all that into consideration, and now here I was, exactly as overwhelmed as he’d predicted.

Just as I started to get down on myself, I heard a knock at the door.

Reggie softly stroked my head one last time and then stood up. The knock must have been a reminder that he was short on time.

“If you’d like, I can arrange things so you won’t be an active participant in any future battles. Think about it again and decide what you want. So long as you stay in this castle, I’m sure you’ll be expected to use your powers to assist us in some way or another. But at the very least, I can insist that you not be taken out onto the battlefield again.”

After calmly pointing me toward an escape route, Reggie left the room.

What a guy. It felt like I was some runaway kid trying to pretend I wasn’t. Not only had Reggie figured out exactly where I was headed, but he’d smoothly handed me directions on how to get home while he was at it.

“This is almost depressing.” Even *more* frustrating was that I couldn’t deny that he’d made me feel a little better.

Right then, I heard a small laugh.

“Oh, to be young and in love! Eeeheehee.”

“What?! Is that you, Master Horace?!”

As if that voice could be anyone else. Where is he, though?

I looked around in a panic, and there he was, sitting like an ornament atop the fireplace opposite the bed. I’d been so preoccupied, I hadn’t noticed him there at all.

“Wait, don’t tell me you SAW all that!”

While I was horrified to find that someone had been watching us the whole time, Master Horace laughed with glee. “Now that was a good show! It’s the little things that make life worth living, even as a disembodied soul. Why, back when I had my hands full as an animal handler, I never imagined I’d be having this much fun!”

Ugh... So he really DID see everything. And did I just hear him call those monsters “animals”?

I was so embarrassed, I couldn’t help whining, “You should have said something, Master! You have some nerve, quietly spying on my private affairs!”

“With the way you were jostling me around inside that rucksack, even a doll like me would start to feel queasy; I was quietly recovering. Looks like that got me mistaken for a personal belonging of yours. That little lady who was looking after you took great care in setting me up here. Eeeheehee!”

“Nooooo...”

I would really hate for anyone to think I owned a doll like this.

Maybe it’s strange for the person who made it to be saying so, but no

girl should have a clay figurine this hideous. We're not talking about some quirky little knickknack here! She probably thinks I'm a total weirdo now... I need to remember to clear this up with Maya later.

"I don't want anyone thinking *this* is my idea of cute," I accidentally mumbled aloud.

"Hold it right there, little disciple! Just what sort of form did you make for me?!"

Oh... Oops. I haven't had the chance to explain to him what his new form looks like. "Uhh, you know, it's sort of like a miniature version of that golem I made."

"If that's all it was, you wouldn't have such a problem with it."

He's too sharp. I couldn't think of a good excuse, so I just fell silent.

Master Horace indignantly stomped his feet, making little clinking noises as he did. "I *can* move my neck a little, you know. I've caught glimpses of my arms and legs! The intricate pattern looked like it belonged on a piece of pottery, so I figured you'd turned me into a real classy doll! But thinking back on it, everyone who's seen me gives me a mighty startled stare!"

"Umm, I mean, think about it! Anyone would be surprised if a doll started talking, right?"

"Not that kind of stare! Some of them looked downright revolted! I've been trying to brush it off, but what in the world have you made me into, little lady?!" Master Horace grew more and more heated.

"Curses! I escaped with my life, and now I'm doomed to spend it in some hideous form..." The little clay figurine pressed both hands to the ground as he lamented his fate.

Oh no. This is really funny.

The whole scene lifted my spirits a little.

Master Horace had died right before my eyes, and without me, he would have been doomed to turn into sand and fade away completely. When I'd watched the defective spellcasters die, I had been so scared that the same fate might one day befall me—but strangely enough, I hadn't felt that same fear when it was Master Horace's turn.

Most likely, it was because he had chosen to live on, even as a disembodied soul.

I decided to put my feelings into words. "Say, Master Horace. Thanks for asking to live."

"Wh-Where'd that come from? No reason to thank me when I more or less forced your hand. What, are you trying to win *me* over now? You really are a force to be reckoned with!"

"What are you talking about?"

Who else do you think I've won over, exactly? There was a chance he was talking about... well... *No, there's no way he would be swayed so*

easily.

“In this case, my little disciple, I’m talking about your ability to appeal to people’s emotions.”

Does that mean he was a little touched by what I said?

“In other words, I nearly broke through your tough exterior? Please, as if you’re such a hard nut to crack. You’re always very honest when I ask you something, so I’ve never had to resort to torture.”

“T-Torture?! Just what are you planning to do with me?!” Master Horace backed away, his little body quaking and clattering.

This is the funniest clay figurine I’ve ever seen. I couldn’t help but laugh.

I felt genuinely glad that I’d taken on this old man as my master, weird cackle and all. It was a snap judgment I’d made based on a lack of other options, but I felt satisfied that I had left things up to chance and had come out of the gamble victorious.

And thanks to that honest delight of mine... my mood became a little lighter.

After I’d played around with Master Horace for some time, Maya brought some food up to my room. While she was there, I attempted to explain that Master Horace wasn’t actually a trinket, but he chose that moment to do his best impression of an inanimate object. From there, it was a desperate struggle to make sure she didn’t walk away thinking I was crazy.

Eventually, I managed to convey that Master Horace was a magical creation and that the soul of an old man resided in that clay body. “Magic truly is incredible,” she noted, impressed, before dropping the bomb: “But that means *you’re* the one who came up with his design, right?”

And with that, her unflattering perception of my taste was set in stone.

Why did I have to think of a clay figurine right then? I started to mope, but after listening to our back-and-forth, Master Horace got worked up about his new looks all over again, so I showed him to a mirror and dealt him the finishing blow.

Within that harmonious interlude, I received a summons from Lord Évrard. He wanted me to come to an imminent meeting.

This time, it wasn’t a middle-aged servant lady who came to get me. A knight in service to the margrave himself brought me a formal summons. It served as a reminder that my position within the castle was no longer what it used to be; most likely, Lord Évrard had changed his handling of me in light of my new role as a spellcaster.

When I had been an ordinary attendant, it had been acceptable for a servant to come fetch me. But to call for a spellcaster, who existed

outside the bounds of rank and was considered no less valuable than royalty, he must have felt the need to send an appropriately ranked escort.

Upon receiving the summons, I spent the next few seconds zoning out.

I had to show up to a meeting. One where we would once again be devising ways to kill the enemy.

I'd always known war wasn't pretty, but even after coming this far, I didn't want to kill anyone. When I inadvertently bit down on my lip, Master Horace whispered to me, "You want your friends to live, don't you, kid?"

Why had I decided to become a spellcaster even though it meant one day turning into sand and leaving no remnant of myself behind? Master Horace helped me remember my motivation, steeling my resolve once more.

I decided to accept the summons, but I had to change clothes first; I was still dressed in the soft cotton nightgown I'd been changed into while I was out cold. I asked the knight to wait outside my room, then changed into a new outfit with Maya's help.

When I was on the monster dispatch squad, I'd borrowed small-sized men's clothes for ease of mobility. I thought about going with the same outfit, but Maya presented me with a dress and cloak, insisting that I wear it. It was a thick, well-made dress, red in color, but it wasn't one I owned.

"Lady Évrard had this dress prepared for you. She believed it would be more befitting of a spellcaster than ordinary military clothes."

Apparently, Lady Évrard had prepared this outfit as a sort of congratulatory gift. She'd ordered it way back when I'd first started on my whole "I'm the woman who will become a spellcaster!" thing.

She's like the mother I always wished I had. Moved by her kindness, I felt salty tears welling up in my eyes.

Per Maya's instructions, I changed into the dress, but something suddenly occurred to me. "Wait, won't this make it a little hard to charge in with my golem?"

For a Level 1 spellcaster like me, putting too much distance between myself and my golem would break the magic spell. In order to stick close to it, I'd sat atop its shoulder as if I were riding a giant robot... but if I did that in a *dress*, the wind could kick up my skirt and put me in a very precarious position.

"She accounted for that," Maya responded with a smile. "If you're wearing these clothes, you'll have to think twice before you engage in any rash behavior. The dress doubles as an admonishment."

I had no comeback for that. Unfortunately, it seemed both Lady

Évrard and Maya viewed me as prone to recklessness.

But true enough, if I didn't want anyone to see my legs, it meant I'd either have to bring someone along to carry me or consider my surroundings more carefully as I fought.

Lady Évrard is a strategist through and through. Like nephew, like aunt.

Once I'd changed into my new clothes, I grabbed Master Horace from underneath the bedding, where I'd hidden him away until I finished getting dressed. His desperate struggles with the blanket had been adorably reminiscent of a little mole. Despite his grumblings, I held him close like a teddy bear, and together we moved to the meeting room. A few people gawked as we walked by—not at *me* so much as the doll I was holding—but I didn't pay them any mind.

When we arrived at the meeting room, the knight who had served as my escort held open the door. Inside the spacious room, which was furnished with a long table, were many of the same people who had attended yesterday's meeting. The seating arrangements had just been altered a bit.

Reggie was at the head of the table, with Groul standing behind him. On either side of Reggie sat the margrave and his wife. Evidently, Lord Évrard hadn't escaped the battle completely unscathed. His complexion was washed out from exhaustion, and I spotted bandages peeking out from under the cuffs of his uniform.

Seated next to the margrave was Alan. Like the protagonist he was, he'd seemingly made it through that rough-and-tumble battle—even going out of his way to assist me—without getting a scratch on him.

I wonder what level he'd be in the RPG by now.

The cavalry general had suffered heavy wounds. Between the bandages wrapped around his head and his arm hanging in his jacket like a makeshift sling, he was rather hard to look at. Perhaps because he had been holed up inside the castle walls, the garrison commander didn't have any obvious injuries, but his expression was grim.

The biggest change of all was that a chair had been arranged for me—the vacant seat between Alan and the cavalry general. Lord Évrard's knight ushered me towards the chair and instructed me to have a seat.

In other words, this was where a spellcaster fell within the hierarchy.

I swallowed nervously. I was worried I'd make a fool of myself with the way my legs were trembling, but I managed to take a seat without awkwardly stumbling into my chair.

Now that everyone had gathered, Lord Évrard opened his mouth to speak.

“First of all, I would like to express my gratitude to His Highness for his deft command of our troops. Furthermore, I would like to honor the tireless efforts of everyone seated here and pay tribute to those who laid down their lives.” At those words, everyone hung their heads and fell silent.

After an appropriate amount of time had passed, the cavalry general expressed his regret in a trembling voice. “If only I hadn’t been outpaced by the enemy, your men wouldn’t have died in vain.”

“I was no better in that regard, Tremayne. But fortunately, she came to our aid.” Lord Évrard’s eyes turned to me, and everyone else’s gazes followed.

Ugh... Talk about nerve-wracking. Unconsciously, I hugged Master Horace tighter.

“Don’t fret, my little disciple,” Master Horace whispered. “Not going to wither with a mere handful of eyes on you, eh? Your goal here is to come out victorious against a force of tens of thousands of men. Eeeheehee. Once you step out onto the battlefield, you’ll be showered in gazes a lot more vicious than any of these. Why, you already endured that only a few hours ago! This ought to be nothing.”

“Ugh... I know, I know.”

Master Horace was right. At the time, I had been too preoccupied to worry about it; it had taken all I had to avoid thinking about the people I was killing. Still, his words gave me a little bit of courage.

I screwed my eyes shut for a moment, and when I opened them to look back at Lord Évrard, he was smiling at me.

“Thank you, Kiara. You acquired power knowing full well what it could cost you. Your sacrifice saved us all, and for that, I am grateful.”

“Oh, well... I’m just glad I could do something to help.” I could hear my heart pounding in my ears, but I managed to come up with an innocuous response—though like before, I had to wrestle with the word “glad.”

“Henceforth, and in an official capacity, I would like to regard you not as an attendant, but as a spellcaster. Will you accept this offer?”

“Ngh...”

Much like a knight could be appointed as an officer, he wanted to officially employ me as a spellcaster.

I’d become so accustomed to my life as an attendant that my first instinct was to turn him down. *No, bad Kiara! If I don’t accept his offer, what was the point of any of this?* If I asked to be treated as an attendant rather than a spellcaster, no one would know how to deal with me.

Answering that way would be the same as saying I didn’t want my role as a spellcaster to be public knowledge. I was sure that Lord Évrard would be willing to find a way to make that possible, but all it

would do was create more work for him.

I decided I was going to fight, so I can't go running back to the bourgeois now, I scolded myself, and then gave my answer.

"Y-Yes. Thank you very much."

Lord Évrard looked relieved at my response.

But there was one person whose expression remained stiff—Reggie.

He was probably worried that serving as a spellcaster would only hurt me. But... there was no going back for me. Now that the situation had changed and I had no idea what was going to happen next, I had to be poised to openly fight in the war if I wanted to protect Alan, Reggie, or anyone else.

I still hadn't come to terms with murder, but for now I'd just do my best to keep my friends alive. I decided to focus on making sure everyone made it home in one piece, and let myself agonize over what I'd done afterward.

That said, I wasn't as selfless a person as I may have appeared. Thus, I opted to throw my mentor under the bus to move the conversation away from me.

"But you know, everything is REALLY thanks to Master Horace for taking me on as his disciple. Without him, I wouldn't have the slightest clue what I was doing," I stressed.

Upon being thrown into the center of the conversation, the little clay figurine seemed to fluster, stirring with a clacking sound.

Everyone's eyes shifted to the clay doll I was holding, so I plopped him on the table as if to hide myself behind his little body. *Go on, Master! Protect your disciple!*

As I cheered him on in my mind, Master Horace glanced back at me. I got the sense that those alien-like googly eyes were staring into my soul, but I pretended not to notice.

"Ah, yes. Alan and the others informed us that the soul of a spellcaster—the one serving as your master—resides in that clay figurine. Sir Horace, wasn't it? It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Indeed. Horace the wandering spellcaster, at your service. Well! Wanderers or hermits, most spellcasters you meet will be one of the two." There was Master Horace's plentiful life experience at work. He handled himself well, considering he'd been thrown into the spotlight with no warning. "And now that I've lost my real body, as you can see, I'm nothing more than a fleeting existence relying on my disciple's power to function. Eeheehee!"

He let out his usual cackle, which only made the clay figurine exude an even eerier aura. The cavalry general, garrison commander, and Lord and Lady Évrard all looked a little disturbed.

Well, this is just who he is, so I hope everyone can warm up to him

eventually. Plus, it IS my fault he looks so creepy.

“About to hold your war council, aren’t you? To assist my dear disciple, I’ll have a listen myself. Eeeheeh.”

When Master Horace urged him to move on with the proceedings, Lord Évrard nodded. “Let’s review the sequence of events.”

First, Lord Évrard explained everything that had happened from his point of view. He had set out from the castle not long after we did. The plan had been to join up with border patrol and the troops from the branch estates on his march forward.

However, he found the border under attack by the Llewynian army. The enemy’s numbers weren’t that great, but seeing as the border patrol had their hands full fighting off the Llewynians, they could only provide us with 200 men as reinforcements.

Afterward, given that he hadn’t heard anything back from his scout, Lord Évrard stopped at an area much closer to the castle than originally planned. There, he met up with additional troops from the branch estates and military volunteers from the nearby towns and villages, increasing his numbers to 2,000.

It was then that his scout finally returned, informing him that the enemy was 10,000 men strong. Due to the stark difference in numbers, the margrave decided a change of plans was in order. He opted to return to the castle gates.

Unfortunately, they were outpaced by the enemy, and after they’d made it some distance to the castle, the battle began. With the added trouble of surprise attacks from defective spellcasters, the margrave ended up losing three-quarters of his men.

It was a miracle that Lord Évrard was still alive by the time we rushed in. I felt truly relieved that we’d managed to save him, though I couldn’t help but think of the people I’d trampled with my golem in order to do so.

No, I can’t dwell on that right now. I’ll miss what everyone else is saying. In an attempt to clear my head, I pinched the back of my hand and perked up my ears.

Next, the garrison commander began his report of what had gone on inside the castle. Preparations to hold the castle had begun the previous night, so they managed to get the castle town’s residents inside the gates before the Llewynian army arrived. But because the enemy’s numbers had been greater than anticipated, they were unable to go to the margrave’s rescue. The moment they opened the castle gates, enemy soldiers would come pouring in.

Apparently, the castle had also come under attack by defective spellcasters, but thanks to Reggie’s awfully merciless strategy, they were taken out right off the bat. Their plan had been to break down the castle gates, so that was clearly the correct course of action. Still,

given that I'd wanted to purge the tactic from my memory the minute I heard about it, it was a powerful reminder of Reggie's ruthlessness on the battlefield.

I'm scared of you, Reggie!

In any case, now that we had successfully rescued the margrave and brought him back inside the castle walls, for the time being, we were standing guard against a Llewynian attack in shifts. Since the enemy had halted their advance, we could get by with only a lookout for the night.

Lord Évrard surmised that the Llewynian army had stopped advancing due to Reggie's fumigation strategy from earlier that day (apparently, it was poison gas) and my presence as a spellcaster—and above all else because I had trampled their general underfoot. It may have been a little reckless, but it turned out to be a good thing I had attacked the commander's squad. And it was *definitely* a good thing that Cain had been around to ascertain the status of the enemy general with his own two eyes to make up for my cowardice.

When I glanced back at where Cain stood behind Alan, his gaze softened, the corners of his mouth turning up slightly.

I would have to apologize and thank him later. I really couldn't have pulled it off without Cain by my side, and at the very end, I'd even forced him to fight while I drifted out of consciousness in his arms.

"Now, the problem is what to do from here on out." Lord Évrard's expression sobered. "We may have defeated the enemy general, but the Llewynian troops have shown no signs of withdrawing entirely. Until they retreat, we can't recruit any new militia fighters. And without more soldiers, it will be difficult to drive them out of our territory."

Reggie spoke up for the first time. "I imagine the Llewynians are simply having difficulty appointing a new general. If I had to guess, the men most suited to be his replacement were likewise taken out in Lady Kiara's attack. But they'll have established a new chain of command by tomorrow, meaning chances are high that they will resume their attack."

Hearing Reggie call me "Lady Kiara," I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach. This wasn't a setting where we could act like two good friends. I knew that was why he referred to me that way, but it was still an unpleasant reminder of the distance that existed between the two of us.

"If only the other branch estates would take the initiative and gather enough soldiers to overpower their forces," the garrison commander mused, drawing a laugh from Master Horace.

"Not happening. If we're lucky, the ones up north decided to keep

to themselves. Eeeheehee. If they *did* try to stand in the Llewynian's path, they've probably been well and flattened."

"Speaking of which, the Llewynian soldiers did indeed advance from the north... I take it you were informed of their invasion route, Sir Horace?" Lord Évrard asked.

Master Horace laughed. "I never heard the specifics of their strategy. But I do recall a Salekhardian had frequent dealings with the man who hired me. I was told to attack the castle while troops advanced from the north, so I figured the two of them were in cahoots. Seeing as they just let ten thousand men pass through their territory, the whole of Salekhard must've been in on the collusion."

"If it was a bilateral conspiracy, no wonder it was so difficult for us to foresee their movements. And it would explain why Salekhardian soldiers were mixed into their ranks," the cavalry general lamented, brow furrowed.

Our supposed ally, who initially approached us as a fellow victim, had betrayed us. There was little doubt now that Salekhard had fabricated their entire story about the monster sightings. Originally, Lord Évrard had assumed that the Salekhardian army was on the move to dispatch the monsters, but he now concluded that it was all a ruse.

"To think they were working so closely... I'm sure they've already had their talks about territorial cessions," Reggie reflected.

Lady Évrard sighed. "In the worst case, I would say the envoys who came to us about the negotiations, including the ones aligned with Farzia, were likewise under the patronage of Llewynne. It's entirely possible that the whole thing was a pretense, and they never scheduled any negotiations in the first place."

"Are all those at the crux of this loyal to Llewynne?" Alan asked.

"We can't be certain," Lady Évrard responded. "Even considering the queen married into the royal family several years ago, there are still far too many nobles with close ties to Llewynne. Her connections to Lord Patriciél and Lord Credias are a given, but I wonder what tactics she used on the others."

"Eeeheehee. Either they were threatened, or else they were offered a very handsome reward. We're only human, after all; everyone looks out for number one."

Reviewing the facts only made the outlook more dismal than ever. Everyone's expressions clouded over.

What Reggie had to say next only dampened the mood further. "I asked Lord Limerick and Lord Reinstar to send their reinforcements if anything went awry. They did contact me by messenger bird, but based on that information, they're still over two days away. And soon enough, the Llewynians will realize we've arranged for auxiliary

troops. If they're looking to complete their conquest in a hurry, they might send out more defective spellcasters to break open the gates."

"In short, there's nothing we can do without our reinforcements, and if they realize those reinforcements are on the way, the Llewynians may try to finish this tomorrow," Lord Évrard summarized, and Reggie nodded.

"What's more, knowing now that Salekhard has betrayed us, I can't imagine Llewynne moved their forces simply to invade the border with a mere ten thousand men. It's safe to assume that more troops are marching on the royal capital as we speak."

At Reggie's prediction, silence fell once more. Everyone was trying to think of a breakthrough solution—most likely, one that involved me.

All I was really capable of, however, was making a single giant golem run around the battlefield. Plus, there was a limit on how long I could keep that up; it would be hard to defeat the Llewynian army with only that going for us.

If we could just draw the Llewynian soldiers a certain distance from the castle and then have them give up their assault on Évrard...

"Forcing them to withdraw is the win condition here," I muttered, then immediately regretted it. Deciding a "win condition" was definitely thinking in RPG terms.

But perhaps that phrasing was easy to understand, because Lord Évrard responded, "The win condition, hm? True enough, simply holding the castle would feel like a victory for our side."

"Forcing them to withdraw is certainly our main priority," the cavalry general said. "We need them to fall back before we can hope to increase our numbers."

Everyone nodded in agreement. Encouraged by the general air, I decided to take the plunge and say my piece.

"Um, given our current numbers, we currently have no way to stop their invasion of the royal capital. It's best not to focus on that until we do. And I doubt the troops outside the castle will have retreated come tomorrow, seeing as their goal is to assassinate His Highness."

In the game's opening cutscene, the enemy's main troops only withdrew as quickly as they did because they'd successfully assassinated Reggie and taken Évrard Castle—thus eliminating all heirs to the throne.

"That's true," Reggie said. "Llewynne is invading with the intent to seize command of the kingdom of Farzia. So long as I remain alive as the rightful heir to the throne, that task will prove difficult. Even if they successfully occupied the royal capital, I rank higher in the line of succession than the queen; other countries wouldn't acknowledge

their annexation of the kingdom. After all, if they turned a blind eye to a usurper of the throne elsewhere, the same could pass in their own country.” He closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, he looked like he’d come to some sort of decision. “We’ll just have to make the Llewynians willingly give up their siege.”

He went on to discuss his plans to utilize the soldiers from the territories sending us reinforcements. With Évrard’s forces and the auxiliary troops combined, their numbers would surpass 10,000. Plus, we had a legitimate spellcaster in our ranks, so Llewyn would want to avoid taking us head-on—even with the defective spellcasters at their disposal.

“Thus far, Llewyn has only sent out two defective spellcasters. That could mean they’re unable to produce them in large quantities. So in order to impress upon them that we have a *real* spellcaster in our ranks... I’d like to call upon your help, Lady Kiara.”

This was the first time Reggie had actively sought my strength. There was ice in his expression, but since he had objectively judged that he needed my help, this was my chance.

So I nodded. “Certainly, Your Grace.”

Though of course, I knew full well any plan of his would be unbearably soft on me.



The meeting came to an end, and everyone returned to their respective posts or sleeping quarters.

After most of the others had left, Alan finally stood from his chair. He saw Kiara get up at the same time, hugging the strange clay figurine housing the soul of her master.

Kiara was looking over at Reggie. Reggie locked eyes with her, his expression unreadable.

It couldn’t have lasted longer than a second. Neither of them said a word, yet the two seemed to have a brief conversation through their shared gaze. But whatever that was, it was completely lost on Alan.

Just prior to the meeting, Reggie had claimed he was thinking of ways to keep Kiara off the front lines, but ultimately he had made the decision to let her stand on the battlefield.

And this after he had been so sour about Kiara’s leg-baring episode.

Alan had a thing or two he could say about all *that* fuss, too. In the first place, everyone there had agreed to keep the incident with the windwolves a secret and coordinated their stories ahead of time. Yet somehow, Reggie had picked up on things like Wentworth’s subtly strange behavior or the knights in the castle being unusually kind to Kiara.

One would think treating a girl kindly would be a *good* thing. Why, any knight disgraceful enough to pick on a younger girl ought to be forced to resign.

When Alan had protested that none of the men who'd caught a peek of her legs had done anything untoward to Kiara, Reggie had responded, "What would you do if your own mother had done that? If the margrave heard of such a thing, I'm sure he would command all the witnesses to erase it from their memory."

Alan had immediately apologized to Reggie. Sure, Reggie was probably right that his father would be upset... but he couldn't take the mental image of his parents fawning over each other. The emotional damage was too devastating.

Deep down, Alan found Reggie truly terrifying. As overprotective as the prince was, he was still willing to send Kiara out into battle.

"Is he pushing her out of the nest?" Alan muttered aloud.

If Kiara was a chick determined to leave the nest, perhaps the father bird—Reggie—had judged that the time was finally right and sent her to fend for herself. The explanation was a little too weak to be convincing, but Alan couldn't think of anything else.

Regardless, given her eagerness to fight, Kiara should have been pleased with the outcome. So why had she looked at him with such accusation in her eyes?

Watching those two made Alan want to yell, "Stop staring at each other and go talk it out already!" After all, there were things even a father and daughter couldn't understand without using their words.

At the same time, he also understood that those two were a special case. From the very beginning, there had been a strange sense of understanding between the pair—though at the time, it hadn't appeared to be romantic in nature.

Then again, if it were just a normal romance, Alan wouldn't be left feeling so confused.

Whatever the case, there was no point in sticking around. Alan made to leave the room, only to find Kiara following after him.

"Sir Cain, Lord Alan. May I speak with you about our plans for tomorrow?"

Alan glanced over at Reggie, but he was busy talking to Groul, who had been waiting behind him. And so, taking Kiara and Wentworth with him, Alan left the main tower.

"You can just call me 'Alan,' you know. So long as they aren't bound by a master-servant relationship, spellcasters exist outside the hierarchy."

"I don't know about that, Alan... I was an attendant just yesterday." Despite her protest, Kiara had already adopted a more casual tone.

“It’s nothing you need worry over. So, what did you want to speak to us about?”

“Umm, maybe somewhere with a little more privacy?” Kiara glanced at their surroundings. Since the residents of the castle town had been evacuated, the courtyard was lined with makeshift tents, abuzz with people coming and going. True enough, it wasn’t the best place for an involved conversation.

Instead, they found a spot in the parlor of the manor house. After setting her clay figurine on the table, Kiara stayed on her feet, so naturally, Alan and Wentworth also remained standing to face her.

“I’ll make this quick, I promise. I just want you both to be extra careful that Reggie doesn’t get targeted by any arrows or attacked by any enemy soldiers who manage to sneak past our defenses.”

That rang a bell. “Is this about those past-life memories of yours?”

At first, Alan had thought her story ridiculous. However, in becoming a spellcaster, she had proven her claims of clairvoyance. All her predictions about the Llewynian attack had come true as well.

In all honesty, Alan found himself in awe of Kiara. More than once, he had thought about how useful it would be to know the future—though he had been equally sure that if someone with the ability were to truly exist, some part of him would fear them, too.

Kiara nodded in response. “You two are the only ones I’ve told about my past life, so there’s no one else I can talk to about this. So I really need your help... both of you.”

“You only told His Highness that it was a dream of yours, correct?” inquired Wentworth.

“Right. He didn’t press me for answers when I told him about it, so I still haven’t mentioned the past life part.” Kiara hung her head.

Alan understood how she felt. Of course she would be afraid of driving away Reggie, her number one guardian figure.

Initially, she’d even tried to hide it from Alan, but in the end, she had abandoned that approach and confessed to everything. Alan’s attitude had been to blame for that, but there was no other way the conversation could have gone. Unlike Reggie, Alan couldn’t just take everything Kiara said at face value.

At the same time, he recalled there was one other person who had believed her preposterous story.

“I told Reggie there was a chance he could be killed, but since I mentioned it happens inside the castle, he probably believes he’s safe as long as he stays outside the walls; that’s why he proposed the plan he did. Unfortunately, I wasn’t exactly in a position to oppose it.”

“Why?” asked Wentworth.

Kiara gave a strained smile. “I was merely an attendant until just recently, so I was afraid it wasn’t my place to cut into a strategy

discussion.”

But this was *Kiara*. If she truly thought Reggie’s strategy was questionable, she would have said something. Since she hadn’t, she must have deemed his plan solid, devoid of any obvious holes she could poke in it.

Why was he so sure? Because Alan thought Kiara was a fairly decent strategist. Her plan to simultaneously rescue Alan’s father and strike at the enemy had only worked because their side had the unfair advantage of a bona fide spellcaster, but it was a sensible one, and it was one she’d chosen within the scope of her own limitations.

“But now that we’ve reached this point, circumstances have changed from the ones I remember. So I don’t know if arrows are the only thing Reggie needs to watch out for.”

“Alright. I’ll bring it up with my father. I’m sure Reggie will make arrangements of his own, but the more soldiers we have to protect the man serving as our emblem, the better.”

“Thank you, Alan.” Kiara smiled, relieved.

“I don’t believe there’s much I can do to assist with this matter. I have orders from His Lordship to act as your escort again, Miss Kiara,” Wentworth informed her.

Kiara made a face of protest, her eyes falling and eyebrows tilting upward. “That’s really not necessary.”

“If your magic runs out, there’s little you can do on your own—or am I mistaken?”

“No, sir...”

It looked like Kiara had some regrets about collapsing in the middle of her charge toward the castle. If Cain hadn’t been there, there was no telling what could have happened to her.

That reminded Alan of why Cain had begun to accompany Kiara in the first place... and what had come of their ventures.

“Right... Kiara. Have you decided what you want as an apology? Feel free to ask for whatever it is you desire. I’ll do anything in my power.”

“As an apology?! Oh...”

Kiara had completely forgotten about it. Alan figured he could just ask her again later, but after a short pause, she was struck with an idea. She clapped her hands together, beaming brightly.

“How about this? I’d just been thinking that I wanted to repay Sir Cain for his help. So, Sir Cain, you should ask Alan for whatever you’d like, and Alan, you can take care of that as an apology to me!”

In the face of Kiara’s enthusiasm, Alan and Wentworth exchanged glances. Judging by the troubled look on Wentworth’s face, Alan assumed they had similar feelings on this.

“Let me ask for the record: what sort of reward would you want

from Kiara?"

"Specifying 'from Miss Kiara' could be dangerous here, milord."

"I supposed as much."

Knowing Wentworth, after ruling out any requests he deemed too unreasonable, he would settle on the "blessing" one could receive from a daughter of nobility.

In other words, Wentworth would ask for a kiss on the cheek. Of course, if that request were laid at Alan's feet, it would take on a frightfully different meaning. With the way things were headed, everyone there would be subjected to an assault on the eyes, one which Alan had absolutely no interest in performing.

Kiara's doll of a master began chuckling deviously. He had likely arrived at the same conclusion as Alan and Wentworth.

Still frowning, Wentworth suggested, "Perhaps we should keep to the initial plan where Lord Alan apologizes, and I receive my thanks separately?"

"Well, if it's easier that way, I don't mind."

While Kiara mumbled about how at least there was no one else around to see, Alan placed his sword on the floor and knelt down before her. The lack of an audience didn't stop Kiara from panicking.

"Upon the name of Alan Évrard, I once again offer you my most humble apologies."

"Okay, I forgive you! See, now you've apologized twice, so we can all move on!"

Having someone kneel before her seemed to do little but unnerve Kiara. As she was flapping her hands and begging for it to be over, Alan rose to his feet. There, Wentworth cut in, his demeanor unusually playful.

"For my part, I would like to receive your blessing, Miss Kiara."

"Ngh..."

When she heard the word "blessing," Kiara grew flustered and avoided his gaze. After all, it meant giving him a kiss on the cheek; she must have gotten cold feet.

"Then would you be more comfortable carrying it out in the manner of two women?" Having anticipated Kiara's reaction, Wentworth blithely proposed an alternative.

"Oh, that would be much easier... Wait, you don't mean—?!"

"Hey, Wentwo—"

Although Kiara ought to have had practice with this as the daughter of a count, she didn't connect the dots immediately. Nor did Alan react in time to stop him.

After taking a step forward, Wentworth drew Kiara close and placed a kiss on her cheek.

Long after he pulled back, Kiara's face was flushed a deep red, one

hand pressed to her right cheek. Wentworth gazed fondly at her in return.

Alan blinked. Had Wentworth always been the type of person to do this? He knew the man had his fair share of experience with women, but he'd never seen him tease a younger girl before.

"That should be thanks enough." His expression didn't change, but the knight seemed wholly satisfied.

"Umm, then... I'll be going now!" Kiara squeaked, then fled from the room.

Without thinking, Alan stared long and hard at Wentworth's face.

"Is something the matter?" Wentworth prompted, his tone no different than usual.

Alan couldn't help but ask. "Don't tell me...?"

He intended to finish the question with "you have feelings for her," but for some reason, he found himself trailing off. Wentworth seemed to guess what he wanted to say.

"Let's suppose someone lacked the power to make a wish of theirs come true. If they came face-to-face with someone who accomplished everything they couldn't, how would they react? Would they be jealous? Or something else entirely...? How would you feel if it were you, Lord Alan?"

Presented with a question that sounded more like philosophical pondering, Alan furrowed his brow. "If I can't manage it myself, that's that. I would admit to myself that I didn't have the aptitude and consider how best to leave things in their hands."

"Exactly the answer I'd expect from you, milord." Wentworth gazed out the window. "She was aware she had the aptitude to become a spellcaster, but there was no way to know for certain until she went through with it. Moreover, the situation wasn't the same as the future she had seen. If the two futures didn't line up exactly... there was always some chance she could have failed."

Alan nodded in agreement. If the current reality differed from the future she knew, there was a chance her aptitude was another factor that had changed. Kiara had been so desperate, she hadn't even entertained the possibility.

However, a normal person would have considered the risk to their own life first and foremost. Was Kiara's desire to protect everyone so strong she hadn't even thought about that?

"The moment she overcame that fear so easily, I felt I had lost to her. She was determined to protect Évrard at any cost. In all honesty, I can't say whether I would be capable of the same."

"Not that I don't agree with you," Alan paused, watching Wentworth closely, "but it's not *respect* that you feel for her, is it?"

Wentworth let out a small sigh. "Come, milord, we shouldn't

waste our time loitering about. Don't you have to patrol the castle walls after this?"

"Answer me, Wentworth! Dodging the question leaves me all the more curious!"

To ask someone a question and then refuse to give your own answer was foul play at its finest. It wasn't as though it would take much time to answer, either.

Would he hate someone like that? Would he love her? Alan wished he would just come out and say it.

"I'm afraid I'd rather keep my personal feelings to myself, milord."

"After YOU brought it up?! That's not fair, Wentworth!"

"Ah, yes. It's been quite a long time since I last heard you say that." In a rare occurrence, the edges of Wentworth's mouth quirked up in a smile. "But too bad. Adults never play fair."



The next day, I woke up a little earlier than planned, so I took the opportunity to sew copper coins into the hem of my skirt.

"What are you doing, kid? Is that your own special lucky charm?" Master Horace asked, watching curiously. I had gotten pretty used to seeing that strange clay face of his, so I was more or less able to read his expressions now.

"If I weigh down the hem, the skirt will be harder to flip up."

I would be climbing up to a tall platform, so I wanted to at least prevent it from fluttering in the wind.

"Aww, now where's the fun in that? Go disarm the enemy with your womanly charms!"

"Oh, please, Master. What womanly charms?"

Master Horace just laughed his trademark cackle. "You don't get it, little lady. An underdeveloped figure has its own—URK!"

Sensing that Master Horace was about to say something wildly inappropriate, I shoved him under the blanket. While he struggled with the bedding, I changed clothes off to the side and put on my cloak.

When I was done, I grabbed Master Horace from where he was wriggling underneath the sheets and, using a leather strap, fastened him to the same belt where I hung my self-defense knife. The strap was hooked around his torso.

Once I had fixed him in place, Master Horace acted somewhat disgruntled about the arrangement. "Now listen here, little disciple! Wouldn't you say it's rude to treat me the same way as your knife?"

For the record, Master Horace was the one who'd complained it was too dark and boring inside my rucksack.

He continued to grumble and gripe, but I simply ignored him as I

headed out of the manor and into the courtyard.

The courtyard, which was usually spacious enough to ride horses around, was still packed to the brim with tents full of evacuees. I detoured around them and made my way to the area near the castle gates, where I found nearly 500 cavalymen and foot soldiers gathered.

The sky had finally begun to clear.

Following the gazes of the rows upon rows of men, I saw Reggie.

Reggie was wearing a long blue cloak draped over a white uniform. Even his beautiful silver hair glittered in the sunlight, making him all the more... well... eye-catching.

Reggie, please... tone it down a little!

At first, I thought the understated bay coat of his horse was his one saving grace, but once mounted, it only made Reggie stand out even more; it was just the right background color.

His gorgeous figure drew the eyes of many evacuated townswomen, who were staring at him as though entranced. They kept their distance from where the cavalry was gathered but leaned forward to get a better look at him.

Reggie's dangerously striking appearance made me restless with worry. He might as well have painted a target on himself. I knew it was intentional, but that only made it worse.

After some time had passed, Lord Évrard, who would be staying behind on account of his injuries, stood beside Reggie and addressed the crowd. "I believe you all have a good understanding of our strategy. We shall defend our emblem, His Highness Prince Reginald, to the last, and change fate itself! Glory to our army!"

"Glory to our army!" The voices of the cavalry, along with all those staying behind at the castle, rang out in unison.

I clasped my hands together in a small prayer and whispered to myself, *Glory upon us. Please bring us victory.*

Alan came to my side and patted me lightly on the shoulder. "I know you're worried, but for now, why don't you focus on avoiding any stray arrows?"

"I know. Thanks."

I knew he was right. If I came all this way only to get shot, I would be a complete disgrace.

When I looked over my shoulder at him, Alan was wearing a cheerful smile—but the smile didn't reach his eyes. He must have been just as nervous as I was. I felt a little solace in knowing that someone else felt the same way I did.

Everyone was anxious. And unlike me, an ordinary soldier had no supernatural powers he could use to defend himself; charging into a place where swords would be flying from their sheaths must have

been all the more frightening for them.

I pinched my cheeks. Unfortunately, I put a little *too* much power into it.

“Ouch! Pinched too hard.”

“What on earth are you doing?”

“I was just trying to fire myself up.”

Alan cocked his head to one side, then asked, “Isn’t *this* the way to do it?” The next moment, he slapped me hard on the back.

“Ow! That was overkill, Alan!”

Hello, do I look like I’m suited up to you? I know you’re wearing chain mail under those clothes, mister. Slapping me with the same amount of force you could handle sounds like a sure way to break me.

“Sorry! I nearly forgot you’re not just one of the men.”

Alan’s apology didn’t sound particularly contrite. Meanwhile, everyone else was busy mounting their horses and forming battle lines. When I saw Cain beckon me over from a little ways away, I headed over to him.

Everyone finished their preparations and fell in line. The area outside the castle gates was quiet, filled only with the breathing of countless horses.

After a scout brought word that the enemy had yet to approach the castle, the gates were opened.

Soldiers rushed out of the gates. After waiting for them to pass, I ran to an area just outside the castle gates and placed both hands on the ground.

“Come on out!”

Just like the day before, a golem composed of a jumble of rocks burst out of the earth. After using my magic, I was struck with sudden lightheadedness. Still, it was only the same level of exhaustion I’d feel after a good jog.

I climbed aboard its shoulder, and Cain came along with me.

“Hold on tight. You came close to falling off yesterday.”

I was just about to grip the earthen guardrail when Cain grabbed my left arm, and I felt my face go stiff. I wanted to calm myself down with some long, deep breaths, but I didn’t want him to suspect anything was wrong, so I made do with shorter gulps of air.

My mind kept wandering to the kiss on the cheek he’d given me just yesterday.

I think he was just teasing me. Yeah. That must be it. After all, Reggie did the same thing just to get a rise out of me.

I told myself that in an attempt to calm my unsteady emotions, but then I heard the laugh of Master Horace, who was privy to all of the previous day’s happenings. “Eeekeeeke,” he chortled, a new spin on his typical cackle.

Nope, time to tune out Master Horace's suggestive laughter. If I start thinking Cain likes me and turn out to be wrong, things could get really embarrassing. Let's just forget about it!

I banished the thoughts from my head and checked my surroundings.

In front of the castle gates, a huge trench-like dent had been left in the ground where I'd created the golem. As a matter of fact, the one who had instructed me to form my golem there had been Reggie. He proposed that the deep pit in the ground could double as a way to protect the castle.

So long as it remained unfilled, there would be no room to set up a large battering ram, and a log small enough to carry wouldn't be hefty enough to break down the gates. Furthermore, plugging up the hole would take a significant amount of time, so it was a simple and easy way to keep soldiers away and boost the castle gates' defenses. When I'd first heard the explanation, I had been astonished. Reggie clearly had a much broader perspective than I did—though I suppose that was no surprise, given my experience was limited to games where all you had to do was level up and defeat the enemy.

"Okay, off we go!" I called out to Cain, then started to move my golem.

"Oho, now *that's* what I call a walking standard-bearer." From his place at my waist, Master Horace looked down through the gaps in the earthen fence. Perhaps he was enjoying himself; the way he was wiggling his short little legs was simply adorable.

When I looked in the same direction as Master Horace, I saw the enemy forces were suddenly on the move. They looked like a colony of ants hurrying this way and that as they busied themselves with preparations, all while advancing in the same direction as us.

The enemy soldiers looked up at the golem I was riding, then turned their attention to the pale figure running ahead of me. I saw some people talk among themselves before waving their bannered spears in Reggie's direction, as if to point him out.

"Oh god, I can't watch this."

His eye-catching figure, flanked by several other men, all but screamed, *Hey, I'm the prince!* I ordered my golem to speed up a little so I could walk side by side with Reggie. I wanted to shield him from the enemies' eyes, even if only a little.

As soon as he noticed that, Reggie motioned for me to fall back. I feigned ignorance and tried to cut past him, which immediately earned me an earful.

"Remind me: *where* exactly were you stationed? I'd appreciate it if you would do as you're told."

Reggie's piercing gaze was almost suffocating. A wave of anxiety

hit me as I wondered if he was finally done with me. *Oh no, I think I'm going to cry.*

"You mustn't disregard orders while on the march, Miss Kiara."

At Cain's prompting, I dejectedly hung my head and moved back to my initial position.

"You can't stray from the determined course of action. It wouldn't be quite as difficult to recover now, when we only have five hundred men, but once we increase our forces to ten thousand, it will affect our tactics if someone with your kind of influence falls out of line."

"I'm sorry." All I could do was apologize.

I understood, of course. Reggie moving forward in the face of danger was the linchpin of our strategy this time... and there was no point if he wasn't conspicuous.

Our reinforcements were a long way away. But if we just waited around for them, our forces would dwindle over the course of those one or two days, and by the time they finally arrived, we would be in a very difficult situation.

Thus, what Reggie proposed was that we go meet the reinforcements ourselves.

Since Reggie was our enemies' target, we could use him as bait to lure their army in. Using that to our advantage, we would draw the enemy away from the castle, and then as soon as we joined up with the reinforcements, we'd begin whittling down their numbers.

In order for the plan to work, Reggie had to draw attention to himself. On top of that, we had to make it look like Évrard was allowing Reggie to escape from the castle before the siege dragged on too long.

If the spellcaster was accompanying him, it would lend more credibility to the idea that they were trying to let the prince get away. It was for that reason, and that reason alone, that I had been asked to join Reggie's forces.

We had to make them aware of my presence, so I began my golem's march the moment we set out. However, if we never let our guard down, they might give up on attacking us and return to the castle, so I would retire the golem during our breaks.

It was our way of dropping hints that, hey, maybe the spellcaster can't control her golem all day long! Of course, there *was* some truth to that.

For the record, if the enemy decided to attack while my golem was out of commission, the plan was for Cain to grab me and escape. I didn't think that was necessary, but everyone was of the mind to prioritize my protection.

Which, of course, was because Reggie had said, "If I fall to the Llewynians, Alan can still stake a claim as the rightful heir to the

throne. Our spellcaster is far more valuable.”

There had even been some discussion of using Reggie as bait if I were in immediate danger. Thankfully, Lord Évrard persuaded Reggie to discard that idea, but I would still be given precedence; there was no way around that part of it.

Reggie seemed satisfied with that. With that one declaration, he had instilled in everyone the importance of protecting Alan and myself if something happened to him.

Never before had I regretted telling him about my past life so strongly.

Reggie knew that if he died, Alan would take command of his troops and triumph over the Llewynians. So in the event that anything happened to him, he wanted to ensure that I would be protected.

Most likely, ordering me to maneuver my golem whenever we were on the march was another part of his strategy. Once the fighting broke out, I wouldn't be able to take part in the battle for very long, and I would have to fall back to a safe place.

“And after I finally committed to fighting, too.”

Knowing that I was terrified of killing people but determined to fight regardless, he had essentially given me extra time to sit back and get used to the sight of war. I was grateful, but I wasn't pleased.

Since everything was set in stone, I had no way to go against him, leaving me all the more frustrated.

While I fretted and surveyed the scene below, I saw the enemy forces gradually begin to move in our direction. Apparently, they had opted to prioritize the princely figure and the spellcaster. Only about a third of their forces remained near the castle.

“Their forces are well organized. As His Highness predicted, they must have appointed a replacement for their general.”

Cain posited that the reason they weren't closing in on us more quickly despite that was because I had overrun their forces the other day.

“Precisely because their new general was chosen as a stopgap, he's decided to play it safe instead of diverting all his forces from their original goal. However, we still managed to lure the majority into chasing us, so we succeeded in our goal of drawing them away.”

“This should be plenty. Eeeheehee! That prince of yours is more daring than he looks.” Master Horace cackled with glee.

Cain and Master Horace gazed down at the battle lines of the Llewynian army, which stretched out and twisted like a snake. They, too, appeared to be a mix of cavalry and foot soldiers. The speed of their march wasn't especially fast.

Of course, there was also a limit to how much distance the foot soldiers of the Évrard army could cover. Once we'd gained some

distance, we took a short break.

After sending an advance party to spy on us from beyond the hills, the Llewynian soldiers closed some of the gap, then halted their march. Perhaps, I thought, they determined that they needed a bit of rest themselves in order to put up a fight.

Cain's analysis was different.

"At this distance, there's still a chance we could go running back to the castle. It would be easier to wait until we're completely isolated, then overrun us by force of numbers. Let's come down for now, Miss Kiara," he suggested.

I had the golem lower us to the ground in his hand like a manual elevator. As silly as it was to say when *I* was the one controlling it, I felt like I'd been dropped into a giant robot anime.

There, I returned the golem to a pile of dirt.

By that point, I'd been controlling it for a total of thirty minutes or so. I felt the same fatigue as if I'd done a five-minute run.

"Perhaps it's easier the second time around."

"The better you get at wielding your magic, the less demanding it'll be to use," Master Horace explained.

The day before, I had asked Master Horace if there was some trick to keep myself from collapsing right away.

His first piece of advice was to focus no more than the necessary amount of mana on *only* the parts of the golem I needed to move. The second was to utilize the mana woven into the golem itself in order to reduce the amount I had to supply it with.

I had practiced a little on Master Horace; his clay body turned out to be very ticklish, so I got to watch him roll around in a bout of giggles. It was incredibly entertaining.

Incidentally, I had also been channeling some amount of mana into Master Horace. But seeing as a piece of the contract stone was built into his clay figurine, regular charging sessions seemed to do the trick; plus, only a small amount of energy was needed, so it didn't feel like he was much of a drain on my reserves.

Thanks to all that, I avoided the disaster that would be passing out just as the ball got rolling... but still, if it was this bad after just thirty minutes, I dreaded what was to come.

As I fretted over what I could do to extend my hours of operation, I took a canteen out of the bag Cain had been carrying for me and took a sip.

Then, I heard a few voices.

"That girl's the spellcaster, isn't she? Incredible!"

"I've heard stories of spellcasters setting fire to everything around them, friend or foe... but *ours* won't do that, right?"

"She looks like a normal girl to me. If I hadn't seen what she can

do with my own two eyes, I wouldn't believe it."

A little ways away, a few squires and soldiers were talking in a group. I could pick out the former because they were wearing the same blue military uniform as a knight.

This was the first time I'd ever heard people gossip about me while I was standing right there. Talk about awkward.

At the very least, I wanted to go assure them that I wouldn't be shooting spells all over the place, but I wasn't brave enough to strut over and insert myself into their little rumor mill.

While I was distracted by their conversation, someone whapped me upside the head.

"Bad girl. You disobeyed orders."

"Oh! Reggie!"

At some point, Reggie had walked up beside me. I figured I ought to apologize.

"Err, my deepest apologies, Your Grace."

Not only did I avoid eye contact, but I couldn't stop myself from delivering the apology in an insincere monotone. After all, I still wasn't happy with his strategy.

Reggie had probably picked up on my discontent, but he didn't seem to care.

"Follow my orders, and there won't be a problem. However..."

Reggie brought his lips right beside my ear. *Hello, Reggie?! We're in public! What will people think if they see the prince getting so close to a girl?!*

"If you act out in the midst of an emergency, well... you know what will happen then."

I turned white as a sheet. *Great... He totally knows that I'm planning to go rogue if push comes to shove, doesn't he?*

While Reggie had my attention, the whispers started to reach my ears again.

"Hey, is the spellcaster the prince's... *you know?*"

"I've heard rumors that those two are *very* close. Back when she was an attendant to Her Ladyship, he'd often take her out on his horse."

"You don't think... she's his mistress?!"

"Surely you jest! Why don't I ever hear these salacious stories about our Lord Alan?!"

"I suppose Lord Alan's at the age where his only interest is swinging around swords with his fellow men... Or perhaps he's just unpopular with the ladies?"

"Hmm... The spellcaster's small and cute, sure, but I wouldn't call her alluring."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. It must've been the *prince* who

seduced *her*... but then it's even more of a mystery."

"Maybe he was drawn to her aptitude for magic?"

See? Look at all the rumors you just started! And now Alan's been dragged into it, too.

It was at that inopportune moment that Cain, who had gone to pick up his horse from the soldier looking after it, approached us with Alan in tow.

Alan wore a solemn expression on his face.

Yikes... I'd be upset if I heard people call me unpopular, too. I feel kind of bad for him... Like, come on, he's supposed to be the protagonist of the RPG! Though come to think of it, the game barely featured any romance... Uh, hold on. Does Alan actually have terrible luck with women? Oh god, I can't think of anything comforting to say!

I hid my face behind my hand and awkwardly stared at the ground.

Something must have happened while I was looking away. I heard a few screams, and then the voices suddenly stopped. When I looked up again, the soldiers who had been whispering among themselves were gone. The only people left nearby were Cain, making a face; Alan, still looking glum; and Reggie, wearing an icy smile.

What happened? I'm afraid to ask.

Reggie turned to Alan as though nothing had happened. "You ought to move out soon. So far everything is going as planned, so I'd like you to handle the other matter."

"Of course."

Alan would be going his own way from here. The groundwork for his task had been laid the previous night.

Pulling himself together, Alan lifted his head, stared up at the blue sky above... and after heaving a long sigh, went on his way.

Oh dear... He's still stuck on it.

"Come, we should move out as well," Reggie urged.

Cain let me ride with him on his horse.

And with that, Reggie's troops once again resumed their march.



From there, we began a game of give and take with the enemy.

Reggie's troops set out in a hurry. To preserve my mana, I rode on horseback with Cain.

The Llewynian army chased after us, and because I had yet to summon my golem, the cavalry unit sped ahead to catch up with us. When he saw that, Reggie gave me the signal.

As soon as my golem entered the scene, the Llewynians slowed down and put more distance between us. Reggie had my golem act as our rearguard all the way until we reached our next resting spot, at

which point I dispelled my magic again.

The Llewynian forces, once more on their guard, watched us carefully as they followed in pursuit. Then, when they saw that I didn't bring out my golem after we left our resting place, they closed in on us once again.

And so, I summoned my golem one more time to intimidate them.

In an attempt to make it look a little stronger, I gave it little devil horns this time around. During our next break, Reggie gently scolded me not to confuse the enemy too much.

After I was done getting yelled at, Cain reported what he had seen from atop the golem. Reggie took out a map and adjusted his orders on how fast his men should march.

It took us about half a day before we reached the grassy meadows of the hills.

There, in the tall, overgrown grass, I returned my golem to a lump of earth and mounted Cain's horse—and that's when the Llewynian army charged forward.

The enemy had picked up on our rhythm and arrived at the conclusion that I couldn't bring out the golem unless I'd had enough time to rest. So as not to miss their opportunity, they had the cavalry gallop ahead and catch up to us in one long stretch.

A shiver ran down my spine as I watched the mob close in on us from behind. When I heard the call of the enemy's bugle signaling for them to advance, my whole body jumped.

"It'll be alright. Just hang in there." Cain did his best to calm me down, spurring on his horse from behind me.

In that moment, I felt truly relieved that Cain had come along with me. If I were on my own, I would've been rooted to the spot with fear and missed my chance to run.

Throughout our stop-and-go routine, Reggie and the cavalry had brought up the rear, while the foot soldiers had been stationed at the front. The moment they reached the grasslands, the foot soldiers began their mad dash into the grass.

We ran after those foot soldiers, driving our horses towards the left-hand side of the hills, where the grassland stretched further. The grass was tall enough to cover the full height of the horses, but the bodies of the riders were visible above the greenery.

The enemy kept pace with us.

With Cain holding me in place, I glanced behind us to see how close they were. "Erm, Sir Cain! They're gaining on us!"

"I'm sure they are."

From atop the horse, I had a clear view of the swarm of enemies drawing closer and closer. I was scared out of my wits, but Cain just looked ahead with an unchanging expression.

“Are you sure I don’t need to do anything?!”

“Would doing something help you calm down?” Cain asked, and I nodded my head vigorously.

It may have been a predicament of our own creation, but one wrong move could spell our total demise. Surely doing *something* would be better for my peace of mind.

“Then once everything is in motion, I can turn a blind eye.”

“Oh, thank y—”

The moment I opened my mouth to thank him... countless arrows came flying from the grass to our left.

“Eek!” Knowing we’d only been a short distance from getting caught in those arrows’ path, I shrank in on myself.

But this was another part of Reggie’s plan.

Once the Llewynian cavalry came chasing after us, they would be stopped in their tracks by the barrage of arrows—or their horses might be struck, bucking their riders, or the soldiers themselves shot through. The enemy would undoubtedly try to fall back, but fire arrows had been launched at the path behind them, setting part of the grassland ablaze.

Normally, the lush and damp grass wouldn’t catch fire so easily. But for the sake of this tactic, dead grass had been scattered around in certain places to serve as kindling for the fire.

The enemy cavalymen did their best to push on while maneuvering around the flames.

Once we had sufficiently cut down their numbers, more soldiers sprang forth from their hiding place on the right-hand side of the meadow.

“CHARGE!” came the order.

Thousands of soldiers struck the Llewynians from the side. The Llewynian cavalymen leading the pack were annihilated, toppled by the human wave.

This ambush was thanks to the efforts of a few knights who had left the castle more than half a day ahead of us and visited the branch estates near the hills to recruit more soldiers.

The knights had also guided the auxiliary troops Reggie requested from the two noble houses to our location. They’d informed the approaching reinforcements of our strategy so we could coordinate a joint attack.

Alan had broken off from our group so he could take up his role as commander of the ambush unit. And of course, Reggie had used himself as bait to lure the Llewynian army to where the trap had been laid.

Our hope was that by alerting them to our reinforcements and eliminating a significant number of their forces in the process, the

Llewynians would be forced to give up their siege.

But while we may have been pushing them back with momentum, there were still many more Llewynian soldiers lined up in the rear. If this battle dragged on for too long, they would call for their own reinforcements, and we would be forced to expend a good deal of our forces.

“Our goal here isn’t a total victory, right?” I said to Cain, then hopped down from his horse, which he had stopped a little ways from the front lines.

“Miss Kiara, what are you—?!”

Before he could stop me, I summoned my golem once more.

Perhaps because I had used my magic so many times over the course of the past half-day, I was short of breath—but that wasn’t enough to keep me down.

I lowered the golem’s hand so I could climb up onto its palm. After I willed the golem to wrap me up in both of its hands and lift me up near its chest, we advanced toward the Llewynians.

“Planning to give ’em a scare? Eeeheehee.” Master Horace guessed what I was up to, and I nodded.

Seeing the massive golem must have stirred up memories of the nightmare that had occurred during the siege. Gradually, the Llewynian soldiers started to pull back, retreating to the northern part of the hills.



Apparently, we’d managed to cut down the Llewynian’s forces quite a bit over the course of the battle. According to Cain’s report, only an estimated number of 6,000 enemy soldiers were left standing.

After that, we spent two days in a standoff.

In order to widen the gap in our numbers, we assumed the enemy would call back the troops they had left at Évrard Castle.

But on the second day, they finally took action.

Several horses from the Llewynian army drew near us. The cavalymen dumped two soldiers from their horses, and with a wave of their black capes, they backed off to a safe distance.

The soldiers who had been cast away were a young and a middle-aged man, both with bruised faces. They crouched down on the ground, unmoving.

At first, I had no idea what the point of it was. But as the pain in my chest grew, I couldn’t stay oblivious for long.

“Defective spellcasters!”

I bit down on my lip and summoned my golem right away. Since I had a meadow to work with this time, the golem had a softer look than usual, the majority of its body covered in green grass.

Some of the Évrard soldiers panicked at the sudden appearance of my golem, but I didn't have time to worry about that. After all, if I didn't stop those men before they went berserk, everyone there would suffer.

I mounted the golem in a hurry, with Cain joining me as a matter of course.

I sat down on the golem's shoulder, and Cain stood beside me. Below us, we could see the two abandoned soldiers writhing in agony.

Oh god, if only they had the aptitude! They would still have to suffer, I know, but at least they could survive by becoming spellcasters. The thought made me hesitate, wondering if I should wait to see how it turned out, but Master Horace gave me the push I needed.

"Put them out of their misery, little disciple. There's no pain quite like having your whole body transformed into mana and cast out of you. Eeeheehee. You remember how it goes, don't you? And if they do become spellcasters, well, that's just a different sort of trouble."

Master Horace was exactly right.

I remembered the first time I ever laid eyes on a defective spellcaster—how he had suffered and begged for me to save him.

Suddenly, the bodies of the soldiers before me began to rise off the ground. A whirlwind had kicked up, engulfing all the men nearby. The defectives' magic had already begun to spiral out of control.

Curling my hands into fists, I charged at the two men with my golem...

And those enemy soldiers, whose futures held nothing but death, were crushed underfoot.

Blood splattered across the ground.

The sight of it shook me to the core, enough that my magic nearly came undone. But I couldn't let that happen—not with Cain by my side. Instead, I slowly dismantled my golem from the feet up.

The color of blood was gradually buried underneath the flood of earth. Along with a sensation like descending in an elevator, my vantage point moved closer and closer to the ground.

Once it was completely hidden from sight, Cain and I walked away. All that remained was a pile of dirt that served as their grave marker.

From where he hung at my waist, Master Horace murmured, "As it stands, that was the easiest way for them to go."

"That doesn't mean it hurts any less."

"Once somebody ends up like that, they don't have the presence of mind to feel anything at all."

As I clenched my teeth together, I felt someone touch my cheek. It was Cain.

His calloused fingers lightly brushed my face, bringing me back to

reality and allowing me to indulge in the comfort of the gesture.

He was as expressionless as ever, but I sensed some sympathy in his eyes. “Don’t be upset, Miss Kiara. You protected our soldiers.”

Hearing those words from Cain, it dawned on me: of course the Farzians would see it that way. I was the one empathizing too much with those men.

Finally, I noticed that everyone around me was celebrating.

I protected them. I did something good, I continued to tell myself as I returned to my position.

“Well done.” Alan patted me on the shoulder, then prompted Cain to give his report.

Reggie, who had seen everything from start to finish, walked over to us. His expression was somewhat aloof; perhaps he had to put up a front around his soldiers. “Good work. There’s a chance they may attempt a second attack; you should rest for now.”

Per Reggie’s instructions, Cain took me to my tent. Once I was alone, I let out a soft sigh.

Things may have worked out for today, but what was I going to do if they sent over more defective spellcasters? What if they were getting new ones ready at that very moment, and they were planning to leave them somewhere like a bomb? I grew increasingly anxious, but Master Horace assuaged my fears.

“The enemy can’t just churn out defective spellcasters at a moment’s notice.”

“How do you know?”

“You saw those two men. Those were obviously Llewynians punished for going against their superiors, or maybe a nobleman. They looked like they’d taken a beating, remember? The Llewynians can only use miscreants like that as their sacrifices, and if they start punishing people left and right, their men’ll go running scared. Mmheehee!”

His explanation made sense, and I was finally able to relax.

The standoff continued for a third day when finally, the Llewynian army changed up their tactics.

The troops that had remained near Évrard Castle caught up to us, increasing their numbers. But just as we prepared for them to turn their swords on us, they began to move.

They weren’t marching toward the castle. They were heading northwest, so according to Cain, they were probably aiming to join up with the troops marching on the royal capital.

“So... that’s it?”

This wasn’t an RPG, so there was no victory fanfare—nor had there been a big, dramatic event that marked a turn in the tide. So even as I watched them march off into the distance... it didn’t feel like

it was really over.

Maybe that was just how things worked in the real world.

Of course, Reggie and the others suspected that the enemy might be trying to lower our guard, all so they could double back and turn things around.

The enemy disappeared from view, our scouts spent half a day following their troops... and at long last, relief washed over everyone with the news that the Évrard army had won.



The soldiers couldn't just relax while we waited for word of whether the enemy would be coming back. There was work to be done burying bodies and gathering up the belongings of our fallen comrades.

It would be impossible to carry the bodies all the way back to the castle. If we brought over all the carriages we would need and slowly transported them back, the Llewynians really *would* take advantage and attack us again.

Cain told me that in these situations, it was customary to burn the bodies so they could return to the soil more quickly, then bury them on the spot, time permitting.

However, that was still a very labor-intensive task.

"We sure are lucky to have a spellcaster around! Means fewer bodies to bury in the end."

"If it hadn't been for her, we might be down there along with them."

Over where the soldiers were chatting so amiably, there was a large hole in the ground, in which bodies were being burned over a pile of dead grass and trees. I'd been warned that the stench of smoldering corpses was dreadful, but fortunately, it was largely masked by the stifling smell of the burning brush.

To escape the smoke, I walked a short distance away from the soldiers.

I stopped when I came across a soldier in a black cloak, buried under the grass. Pushing down my nausea at the three days' worth of rot, I dropped a small copper coin near the corpse.

"Ugh..."

Covering my mouth with my left hand, I continued to walk in search of more abandoned corpses, dropping another coin on the ground for each one I found.

"If it's too much to handle, you ought to step away for a while, my little disciple. Eeeheehee." Master Horace was still bound to my waist with a leather strap. Following his advice, I put my work on hold and entered a nearby grove, hoping nobody else would be there.

Between the smell of grass and the fresh breeze cutting through the trees, there wasn't a trace of the putrid scent of death.

As I breathed a sigh of relief, Master Horace teased me again. "You're too soft, kid."

"Oh, leave me alone. I'm not used to this."

At no time in my current life, let alone my past life, had I ever come across a dead body before, and it was certainly my first time getting wrapped up in a bloody battle. I was pretty sure I deserved credit for not throwing up on the spot. Then again, one could argue that I was just making myself sick doing something I didn't have to.

In any case, I was only halfway done with my task, but my nausea had already reached an unbearable level.

"Bleeeeeegh..."

Under the assumption I was alone, I pressed both arms against a tree and looked at the ground. I wasn't actually going to vomit, but just making the noise made me feel a little better. I'd once heard that the reason people scream when they're scared is that it reduces their fear; this must have been something similar.

Either way, I was glad Cain wasn't with me. A girl my age would never want anyone seeing her like this.

On that note, Cain had left my side because the Llewynian army's retreat meant there were only allies left in the vicinity. Our soldiers were under strict orders from Lord Évrard and Reggie not to let any harm befall the spellcaster, so no one had so much as made a pass at me the entire time.

Nobody wanted to come near the strange spellcaster and her talking doll, anyway. Whenever someone walked by us, all it took was one laugh from Master Horace to scare them off.

Well... maybe the problem was that Master Horace's cackle was too creepy.

On top of that, the environment had changed ever since the enemy had retreated.

Residents of the nearby town had started to come by. In addition to blacksmiths and merchants selling daily necessities, some people had come to sell food. There were quite a few women going to and from the area now.

Thus, Cain left my side more and more frequently, each time offering some variation of "If something happens, feel free to handle the problem with your magic."

At least that meant I could do whatever I wanted. But, well...

"Ugh. This is killing me."

It was harder work than I expected. Still, I had no intention of stopping.

I was going to bury the bodies of the enemy soldiers. That was my

reason for wandering all over the place.

For both Évrard and Llewyn, it was customary to leave the corpses of enemy soldiers unattended. Everyone despised these men for invading and killing our comrades; leaving their bodies to the elements was considered a matter of course. Though they would lift their swords and other such equipment first.

If they knew I was out here putting those people to rest... I was sure our soldiers wouldn't approve of my actions.

I *had* thought up an excuse in case it came up, though. I would just tell them it was so that the stench wouldn't bother the nearby townspeople, and to prevent the spread of disease.

In my past life, I'd never thought about the correlation between war and disease. But I had seen mentions of infectious disease following a natural disaster a few times.

I tried explaining to Master Horace that flies could transmit sickness, but it was the first he'd ever heard of the idea; from that, I assumed people in this world didn't have much knowledge regarding disease prevention. That was why I hoped that if the spellcaster's explanation went over everyone's heads, they'd assume it was just some magic thing and let it go.

I was prepared to go into the weeds of my logic, but I was afraid nobody would understand what I was talking about. Hence why I was sneaking around.

"But I can't stop now. I have to do this while the sun is up, or I won't be able to find them."

The sun was already starting to set. Once it was dark out, I wouldn't be able to see where the corpses were. Even so, I wanted to rest a little bit longer.

As I sat down with my back to the tree, I noticed Alan sitting in the shade of the tree on the left, his face pale.

"Oh, Kiara..."

"Huh? Is that you, Alan?"

What is he doing here?

"Are you feeling sick?" I added.

I thought he might have a cold, but Alan just looked away, like he didn't want to respond to that. Master Horace cackled.

"Been helping cart around corpses, haven't you? You could've left it to your men, but you just had to make a show of saying you'd help out when you had the energy to spare. Guess the smell of blood was more than you bargained for, huh? And now look—you've gone and made yourself sick! Eeeheehee!"

"Ugh..." It seemed Master Horace was right on the money. Alan shot him a baleful glare. "Did you have to say it? Now I sound like a fool."

“Only those who can afford to keep up appearances should bother to do so. Ohohoho.”

Alan must have run out of willpower because he didn't even attempt a comeback. I felt a little comforted knowing he was having the same problem I was.

“I take it you're in the same boat. You looked ready to retch.”

I'd spoken too soon; Master Horace had him at a disadvantage, so he'd just shifted his target. *And great, so he DID see that..*

“Yeah, I'm having the same problem. The smell is worse than I expected.”

“But why? Nobody asked you to carry any bodies,” Alan puzzled aloud, before he put the pieces together. “Were you trying to bury the corpses of the enemy soldiers?”

I didn't answer right away. Given the injuries his father had suffered, I worried he would be angry with me for showing compassion to the enemy.

Plus, this was Alan. In the RPG, he was a steely-faced young man filled with regret over losing his father and his friends. Maybe he wouldn't understand. He probably bore a deep hatred for the enemy. And here I was trying to hold a funeral for them; he might think of me as a traitor.

But it wasn't something I could keep hidden.

“I'm getting things ready so I can bury them later. It's hard to watch them sit out and rot,” I answered honestly.

After a brief silence, Alan looked up at the tree with a sigh. “That's hardly unusual. Who wants to look at a dead body? Whenever you see one lying abandoned, it's easy to wonder if the same fate might befall you one day. I'm sure plenty of soldiers have thought ‘I don't want to be left to rot away like this.’”

I stared long and hard at Alan, caught off-guard by his response.

Maybe it was because Lord Évrard hadn't died. So long as he didn't lose his friends, so long as his castle wasn't taken by storm, perhaps Alan was the kind of person who could calmly reflect on the fates of his dead enemies.

Thinking about it like that, I felt like I'd found another testament to my efforts.

“Besides... I heard from Reggie that you were crying about how you didn't want to kill anyone.”

My eyes widened at the unexpected news. “Uh, hold on... Reggie TOLD you about that?!”

I felt my face grow hot with embarrassment. *Geez, why would you tell anyone that, Reggie?! At least leave out the part where I cried!*

When I hung my head, no longer able to look him in the eyes, Alan rushed to make excuses. “Ah, he had his reasons for telling me,

of course! If you decided you didn't want to fight, Reggie couldn't be the only one arguing to keep you off the battlefield. He wanted me to lend a hand if it came to that, I assume."

"Oh... I see."

If he was just preparing for what to do if I chose not to fight, I had no room to complain. After all, *I* was the one making extra trouble.

Then, Alan stood up. "Let me help you."

"What?"

"You aren't done burying the enemy soldiers, right? You said you were getting ready to do it later. What exactly do you have to do?"

"I'm marking them. I was planning to do a quick burial after nightfall when no one will notice. Master Horace taught me how to use a medium to help channel my magic. If I use these coins, I can bury everyone at once. I exchanged a bunch of my money earlier, see?"

I showed off a small copper cient. Ten cients are worth one large copper coin, and one hundred cients equal one small silver coin. It's the smallest unit of currency there is.

Copper could serve as a medium of magic. I figured I could just use copper coins, in that case, so I went to one of the merchants from the town and exchanged as much money as I could.

"Give me a handful. I can offer what I have, too, but it isn't much."

"You really want to help me?" I asked.

Alan laughed. "I don't have any desire to watch bodies weather and decay myself. Once they're dead, there's no distinction between enemy and ally. Besides," he went on, "this is how you're overcoming your reluctance to kill, isn't it? If burying these men is what it takes to keep you fighting alongside us, I don't mind lending a hand."

I didn't want to kill anyone, but the war had already begun. If we didn't fight, we would be killed.

As I tried to come to a compromise with my own feelings, I had come up with the idea to put all fallen soldiers to rest the same way. Once they were dead, they were no longer an enemy, so it didn't matter if I treated them the same as anyone else.

Thus, when Alan said there was no distinction between enemy and ally, I was shocked to hear my own feelings put into words.

"Reggie won't say it outright, but I'm sure he would support your decision. It just... mm... could affect the troops' morale if the prince was overly merciful towards enemy soldiers, so we have to come up with some sort of justification."

"I've thought about that, too, and I *did* come up with something I could tell him. Insects that spread disease are attracted to rotting matter."

“Gah! Seriously?!”

“Haven’t you noticed how common sickness is near the battlefield?”

“Yes, I suppose so...”

As we talked, Alan and I walked around the battlefield until we ran out of copper coins.



At last, night fell.

I carried out the enemy burial a little earlier than I’d planned, once dinner had ended and the soldiers were absorbed in their merry chatter.

As I was sneaking around in the darkness, Cain stumbled upon me, so he ended up tagging along. Perhaps he had heard from Alan, because Reggie showed up as well, his conspicuous silver hair hidden under a hood.

Under Master Horace’s guidance, I manipulated the soil from a distance.

“Don’t think. Feel,” he instructed me. After a few minutes’ struggle within the darkness, I divined the location of each copper coin using my mana, then cast my magic everywhere at once.

Not far from the lantern Cain had brought along, a corpse was sucked into the ground and out of sight, the soil rising up where it had been. It looked like a small lump of ground had popped up in the grass.

I couldn’t check any of the other bodies, but I assumed the same thing had happened to the rest of them. Once I was done, I sunk down on the spot, feeling utterly drained.

“Well done,” Reggie praised me in a soft voice, gently stroking my head. My eyes nearly drifted shut at the soothing motion.

But I couldn’t fall asleep yet.

Finally, I murmured the funeral scripture. “O God, who watches over our eternal rest...”

Normally, when a priest or father held the service, they would chant the verses loud, clear, and full of emotion. For a secret burial, I figured I could get away with a whisper.

“O Heavenly Grace, we ask You to guide their souls.”

Then Alan, who had also learned it at our parochial boarding school, and Reggie, who appeared to be familiar with it, joined in.

Maybe this was a pointless gesture to the ones sleeping underneath the soil. Perhaps they’d even be miffed that an enemy was taking pity on them.

Still, knowing I had given them a proper send-off, I felt as though a stone settled deep in my stomach had melted away.

Such were my thoughts as I stared up at the starry night sky.





When morning came, everyone noticed that the corpses had been buried. Well, naturally. The source of the terrible odor was gone, and the unpleasant scenery had vanished—it would be hard not to notice.

The soldiers' reactions were mixed.

I was surprised at the even split of opinion. Given how strong everyone's grudges were, I'd expected louder objections.

If anyone suspected that the spellcaster must have had a hand in burying so many bodies at once, they didn't come to me to complain.

"Eheheh. If you get bent out of shape and refuse to show up to the next battle, the number of casualties will double. Who's gonna complain at the cost of their own life?" That was Master Horace's explanation.

Geez, they don't have to act so SCARED of me.

All the complaints were instead directed toward the unit commanders, who then broached the subject to the knights and other higher-ranked officials. In the end, it went all the way to Reggie, who just matter-of-factly delivered my explanation: that it was to avoid troubling the neighboring townspeople with the smell or potential spread of disease.

The soldiers accepted the explanation without a fight. They knew from experience that disease was rampant wherever there were large amounts of casualties, so they must have decided burying the bodies was worth it.

But ultimately, it was framed as something I'd done on Reggie's orders. I felt a little guilty that I'd forced him to take the heat for me.



We had a lot more men to account for on the way back with Lord Limerick's and Lord Reinstar's troops added to our forces, not to mention all the injured soldiers who needed to be carried. Plus, we weren't in any particular hurry, so it took us two days to return.

When the castle finally came into view, it felt like coming home after a long journey.

It was a bit silly, considering I'd only been away for a few days. Still, it was a sign that over the course of two years, Évrard Castle had truly become my home.

Something dawned on me at that moment.

"Oh, that's right. I'll need to hold a funeral here, too."

There were bound to be more enemy corpses lying about near Évrard Castle. The Llewynian troops were in the midst of a war, so

they had probably left the bodies of their fallen soldiers behind.

Cain took me to task for my mutterings. "Worrying about the enemy again?"

I didn't have to look back at Cain, holding the reins while I sat in front of him on the saddle, to guess what kind of face he was making. It was probably a faintly sullen expression. That was how he'd looked when I performed the burial on the hills.

Usually, he never interfered with anything I wanted to do, but this one really got to him. His family had been killed by Llewynian soldiers, so he probably couldn't accept it on an emotional level.

It wasn't hard to imagine why. If Cain or Reggie or Alan were killed, I was sure I wouldn't hesitate to kill the enemy, either.

Surely it was sad and painful, and he needed someone to take it out on. Of course he wouldn't feel guilt over killing the enemy. I understood where he was coming from, so I didn't want to ask him for too much.

"It really is true that it spreads disease! And it wouldn't be good if the people in the castle or the residents of the town got sick. Right?"

"Yes... I have heard similar stories before. Once, the carcasses of dead animals were hurled inside a castle's walls during a siege, and disease ran rampant through the grounds like some kind of curse."

"Ew..."

I was glad the resentment had vanished from Cain's voice, but did he really need to share such a nasty story?

"Um... yeah! Just like that!" I did my best to cut off the conversation there. Master Horace snickered from where he hung at my waist.

When we arrived at the castle, Lord and Lady Évrard were standing outside the open gates.

They'd already been informed of our victory by post-horse, so they welcomed us with bright faces. Still, they must have been worried about whether we were hurt. When they saw Alan and Reggie, their beloved son and nephew, they broke into relieved smiles.

After receiving a short report from Reggie, Lord Évrard greeted the two men leading the reinforcements. One was Lord Limerick's younger brother, a well-built middle-aged man, and the other was Lord Reinstar's uncle, a grizzled gentleman.

I had Cain let me down from the horse so I could walk over to them.

"Thank you, Kiara. We owe you the lives of many of our soldiers." Lady Évrard wrapped me up in a powerful hug. Her warm arms and soft chest reminded me of a mother, and perhaps because of that, tears nearly began to well up in my eyes.

Who could blame me? For the past few days, the only touch I'd

felt was the earthen surface of my golem; or Cain's metal breastplate, which I worried would kill me if I bumped my head against it; or Master Horace, in which case I might as well have been hugging an unglazed vase.

When winter comes, I should bundle Master Horace in some fluffy fur. It would make him much more appealing as an emotional support doll, so I decided I'd ask Maya for advice on that later.

As I developed plans for remodeling Master Horace in my head, Lady Évrard finally pulled back. However, she left her hand on my shoulder and looked me straight in the eyes. "It was my own inadequacy that forced you to choose a fate where you can't even die a normal death. I know... If they use too much of their magic, even a genuine spellcaster can turn into sand. If nothing else, I can promise you every bit of support you deserve for what you've done for us. If you ever need anything, all you have to do is ask."

The expressions of the people standing around us changed. Those who were reminded that I would one day turn into sand and die hung their heads. The rest probably hadn't known that spellcasters led such a wretched existence.

I heard the surrounding soldiers start to whisper.

"Is that true? I didn't know being a spellcaster was such a trial."

"I heard that if they use up too much of their magic, they turn into sand and perish."

"So *that's* why Lord Alan and His Highness go to such lengths to protect her..."

The atmosphere had suddenly become heavy.

It was proof that Évrard was full of good people, right down to the murmuring soldiers. Everyone's hearts were breaking for me.

I almost wanted to apologize. I felt bad garnering all this pity... considering I had completely forgotten about that until Lady Évrard brought it up.

Therefore, I did my best to smooth things over. "I'm fine for now, really! Plus, I have Master Horace on my side! If I mess up, he can get me back on track!"

"Sir Horace, we leave her in your capable hands."

Unfortunately, between Lord Évrard's courtly bow and Lady Évrard's tearful face, the mood didn't lighten up one bit.

Master Horace's half-hearted reply of "Sure, I'll do what I can" didn't help matters, either.

What do I do? Wasn't this supposed to be our triumphant return? Now that the enemy has retreated, I thought we were going to celebrate and make merry! Why do I feel like I'm at a wake?!

My eyes wandered, desperately seeking some help. Luckily, I spotted Reggie and Alan walking over.

Reggie clapped Lord Évrard on the shoulder with a wry smile. “Let’s leave it at that, Margrave. In light of our safe return, we should honor our soldiers and rejoice that the danger has passed.”

“Right you are, Your Highness.” Brought back to his senses, Lord Évrard lifted his head and nodded.

Thanks to Reggie’s intervention, things settled down, and we were able to head inside the castle.

The soldiers couldn’t be dismissed just yet, so, excluding the ones who usually worked inside the castle, they were ordered to wait with the townspeople being sheltered inside the castle walls.

However, we couldn’t ask the same of Lord Limerick’s and Lord Reinstar’s men. The ladies who worked in the castle scurried about, preparing a place for them to stay.

In the meantime, everyone told me to go rest, so I went back to my room. Taking a bath for the first time in days felt like heaven.

Much to my own surprise, I promptly found myself stuck in bed with a fever.

“Must be growing pains. Eeeheehee.” Master Horace laughed at me from where he sat atop the table.

“You think so? But... isn’t sixteen a little old for that?”

How did it go when I was sixteen in my past life? I wondered, but thanks to the fever, my recollection was foggy. *If I don’t have any memory of it, could that mean I died at age fourteen?*

“Besides, most spellcasters end up bedridden as soon as they make their contract. They’re useless for a whole day, at least.”

“What, really?!”

I had no idea.

“You’re just a weird one,” Master Horace sniped. “Think about it: the process is like injecting poison into your body. Mmheehee. To run around fit as a fiddle after going through *that* is the exception, not the rule.”

“Oh... I see.”

That made sense. I’d endured so much agony, I had thought all the cells in my body were going to melt. It was strange that I hadn’t felt a single aftereffect. I ought to have run at least a fever or two.

Yet I got off the hook with pretty light symptoms. Why was that?

“In your case, it’s... you know. You’d ingested some contract sand beforehand, right? That probably helped you out a bit.”

I wasn’t sure if I should be happy about that or not. After all, that meant it was a *good* thing that I’d been forced to drink something to determine whether I had any use as a spellcaster.

Then again, if I’d fallen sick on the spot, it would’ve taken everything I had to contain Master Horace’s soul, and I would have missed my chance to save everyone.

I heaved a sigh, feeling the sweet tendrils of sleep pulling me in.

“After all that running amok, and then making graves to boot, it’s no wonder you’re stuck in bed.”

“Oh, right... I have to perform the burial...”

I’d meant to get it over with quickly; now what was I going to do? Just as I began to fret, Master Horace informed me, “While you were asleep, I asked an attendant girl about it. Since the bodies reeked something awful, they gathered them up and burned them. Sounds like the plan is to let nature take care of the rest, but there’s no rush for you to bury them now. Heeheehee.”

“I see... That’s good...” Relieved by the news, I let out a yawn.

“Got that? So you can go back to sleep, kid.”

“Kay... I’ll do that...”

I barely remembered to say something back. I couldn’t recall anything between that and when I faded back into consciousness, so I probably fell fast asleep.

The next thing I knew, I was slowly coming to, like drifting up to the surface from the bottom of a lake.

What woke me, most likely, was the touch of a hand stroking my head.

The hand glided from my hair to trace my cheek.

Perhaps because my mind was still in a fog, the touch felt distant, like there was a layer of cloth in the way.

“Good night.”

The faint, husky whisper was so hushed, I couldn’t tell whom it belonged to.

What I did know was that, at the very end, I felt something brush against my lips.



“Huh?”

By the time I was fully awake, the bright morning sun was pouring in through the window.

I looked around the room in a daze.

I’d been sure it was pitch-black just moments ago... but perhaps that was just because I’d woken up in the middle of the night.

Did that mean the pat on my head was part of a dream? The “good night,” too?

Not to mention whatever touched my lips after that.

Reflexively, I brought my fingers to my lips and gently traced them. The sensation was so vivid, it was hard to tell if it was the same as what I’d felt in my stupor.

Wait, no... It definitely felt like this! But why my lips? Don’t tell me... someone KISSED me?!

I shuddered.

“Was it a burglar?!”

After all, Maya needed to come in and out of the room to look after me, so the door hadn’t been locked. There was a chance a stranger could have snuck in.

However, the margrave’s room was close to mine, so it shouldn’t have been so easy to sneak around in the middle of the night... or so you’d think. The castle was bustling with activity after our triumphant return, so maybe no one had noticed.

The residents of the castle town had been sent home, but that didn’t rule out the possibility that somebody had stayed behind at their own discretion. If they wanted to take advantage of all the chaos to engage in some thievery, they might have snuck inside the lord’s manor.

Still, there were people keeping watch at the front entrance to the manor. And since Reggie was staying here, so were his knight-guards. Could anyone really creep around without being seen?

“Wait just a second, Kiara. In the first place, why would a thief have any business touching you?” I asked myself.

And had it really been a kiss? Maybe it *wasn’t* a kiss, but someone’s hand accidentally brushing against my lips.

My own idea hit me like a bolt from the blue.

“Somebody’s hand slipped... Yeah, that could be it!”

I had zero romantic experience in both my past life and my present one, so I had no idea if a kiss felt anything like that. Whatever it was, I wouldn’t say it felt *different* from touching my lips with my fingers. In that case, maybe it was just someone who came to check on me, patted my head, and left.

That made the likely suspects Lady Évrard, Reggie, Maya, Clara...

“Hmm... I think the voice sounded like a man’s, though. Maybe His Lordship? Alan... wouldn’t come see me, I don’t think. On the other hand, I wouldn’t be surprised if Cain made frequent visits to check up on me.”

Those were the only people I could think of who would pat my head and say, “Good night.”

“If his hand just hit me by accident, it might have been someone checking up on me in place of Maya. I really shouldn’t be so paranoid. Oh, I know, I could just ask Master Horace... Wait, what?!”

Master Horace had disappeared from his place on the bedside table beside the pitcher.

What’s going on? Now I have to solve the mystery of the disappearing clay figurine?

“Where did you go, Master Horace?”

“Over here, over here.”

He answered right away. I sat up in bed to investigate where the voice was coming from. *Ugh... I think my fever's still a little high. That made me dizzy.*

But I still couldn't manage to find Master Horace.

I got out of bed and stood up. I was a little unsteady on my feet, but it wasn't so bad that I couldn't walk.

Across from the table with the water pitcher, I found a wicker basket sitting on the sofa.

Inside sat the elusive clay figurine. What's more, he had a full bed set with sheets and blankets of just the right size, right down to a miniature pillow.

I rubbed my eyes. Before long, I couldn't hold back the laughter slowly bubbling up within me.

"Wow, Master Horace... Hehehe. Nice doll bed you've got there. Pfft... Ahahaha!"

"Grr... I'm not exactly happy with this setup myself, little lady!"

"Whose adorable idea was this?"

"That attendant looking after you, *Maya*." Master Horace uttered the culprit's name with the utmost indignation.

"Oh, so it was Maya."

If I remembered correctly, she came from a merchant family who specialized in textiles. I'd heard she was good at sewing. *She probably put this together while we were out of the castle... Ehehehe.*

"By the way, do you remember if anyone came into the room while I was asleep?"

Master Horace's soul was bound to the clay figurine, but he wasn't a living, breathing human. As such, he didn't need to sleep. In other words, if anyone came in or out of the room, he should have seen it.

However, Master Horace replied with some bemusement in his tone. "Now let's see... Sometimes I get lost in the sea of thought, so I can't say I see everything. But... hmmm. Your prince showed up and did his best not to laugh when he saw me, but that **INSOLENT** attendant asked his opinion with a hopeful smile, so he offered some hollow praise. Completely ignoring my protests, mind you! Other than that, there was your bodyguard, another attendant, an elderly servant, and the margrave and his wife."

Darn... That's a long list.

But that meant someone on that list had patted me on the head... and touched my lips.

Based on what Master Horace said, Maya was here when Reggie came by, so there probably wasn't much chance for anyone else to sneak in, either.

Not that anyone could have broken in unnoticed with Master Horace here, anyway.

Still, it was a relief to hear. I hadn't been approached by some nefarious stranger; someone had probably just brushed their hand against me by accident.

Yeah, now that I think about it, there's nobody who would even want to...

Just then, I remembered—about the time our faces had gotten too close.

But Reggie wouldn't do that. Somehow, I just knew he'd never do anything to frighten me.

Now that I'd calmed down, I was starting to feel thirsty. After I'd poured myself a glass of water from the carafe, hunger struck. *Guess I'll go get something to eat.*

I was feeling a little more steady on my feet, so I pulled on a pale blue dressing gown over the nightgown Maya had changed me into, and then I stepped out of the room.

The kitchen was on the first floor of the manor.

With a pair of soft slippers on my feet, I headed through the hallway and down the stairs. Everyone must have been otherwise occupied because I didn't run into a single soul along the way.

Thanks to my fever, I ran out of breath pretty fast, but I arrived at the kitchen before too long.

The preparations for lunch had begun; the aroma of meat and vegetable stew wafted through the air. I could practically taste the mild, salty broth on my tongue, and it was all I could do to keep from drooling.

I opened the door to the servants' dining room, located next to the kitchen. If there were any leftovers, I would ask if they minded sharing.

Inside was a group of middle-aged servant ladies. They appeared to be mending the clothes that had just been washed.

"Good morning! Um, do you happen to have any food—"

I didn't get the chance to say "left over."

"Kiara, my dear! What on earth are you doing up and about?!"

"You have a *fever*! Go back to bed!"

"You're a spellcaster now, child! You don't belong among a gathering of servants!"

I was admonished by all of them at once. My words vanished into thin air, drowned out by the tempest of their concern.

"Oh, but I'm so *proud* of you for becoming a spellcaster! I always knew you were a tough girl!"

"Are they really sending a tiny girl like you into battle? You're nearly my grandson's age!"

"Isn't your grandson two years old?"

"Err, ahem!"

My attempt to get a word in failed, like it had bounced off an invisible barrier.

"You were out on the battlefield, weren't you? And see, now you've come home with a fever!"

"I heard you sent ten thousand soldiers running! Goodness, the girls chosen as Lady Évrard's attendants are made of different stuff."

Guess I have no choice but to wait until the storm passes. Just as I hazily resigned myself to my fate, a savior appeared.

"She's sick, everyone! Give her some space!"

Harris, the chef's apprentice, stepped between me, still lingering in the doorway, and the servant ladies, who had all gotten up from their seats to crowd around me.

His reprimand brought the ladies back to their senses, and the whirlwind of chatter finally died down.

Whew, I'm saved!

But when Harris turned to look back at me, I was next in line for a scolding.

"You're just as bad as they are. We left a bell in your room, remember?"

"Well, yes..."

I felt a little bad using it to call for anyone, so I'd decided to just walk down on my own, but Harris wouldn't stand for it.

"The issue isn't just that you're sick. You're not a regular servant anymore." As he lectured me, his scowl softened to worry, and he added, "I've heard that spellcasters are influential enough to speak freely to royalty. You occupy an irreplaceable position, so you need to act like it. Don't forget that you have a new job now."

Harris was completely right, so there was nothing I could do but nod my head. It was true that I was no longer an attendant. I held an even higher position than the cavalry general and garrison commander during official meetings, so I had to act accordingly.

I certainly couldn't imagine either of those men showing up here to beg for scraps.

"Okay... I'm sorry. Also, I'm a little hungry, so would you mind bringing some food up to my room?"

"I'll ask Maya to bring you something in a bit. Now go back to your room and wait."

His expression now much more gentle, Harris agreed to take care of it, so I decided to go back to my room.

As I closed the dining room door behind me, I heard a servant lady say, "You did what you could. Love across classes just isn't meant to be."

The head chef added, "You can take the rest of the day off. Nothin' hurts like a broken heart."

“WHAT? It’s not like that at all! Where did you all get that idea?!” came Harris’ flummoxed reply.

Apparently, everyone had gotten weird ideas in their head from seeing Harris act friendly with a girl his age. If I went to set the record straight on his behalf, it was likely to just stir the pot even more, so I reluctantly walked off.

Truth be told, it was getting a little difficult to walk upright. I’d been feeling a lot better when I’d woken up, but evidently, that wasn’t going to last.

I climbed the stairs, aiming to return to my room in a hurry. Unfortunately, that was the hardest part of the trip. I only made it to the second floor before I had to squat down on my heels.

“Ugh. I rushed into this.”

If I had known this was going to happen, I would have put up with the hunger and gone back to sleep. Then the kind and caring Maya would have brought me something herself. *Why did I decide to move again? The fever must be making me crazy.*

While I rested, filled with shame and regret, I heard the sound of a door opening and shutting on the second floor, followed by a surprised voice calling out to me.

“Kiara? What are you doing there?”

When I lifted my head, I saw Reggie rushing over to me, looking unusually alarmed.

Presumably, he was just on his way to another room in the manor because there was no knight-guard accompanying him, and he was dressed in a simple, light yellow tunic over a shirt.

Since I was crouched down on the staircase, he could tell I wasn’t feeling well. He dropped to his knees beside me and put a hand to my forehead.

I jolted at the touch. Probably because it reminded me of how someone had stroked my head while I was sleeping.

Meanwhile, Reggie’s expression darkened. “You still have a high fever. Why did you walk all this way by yourself?”

“Mmm... I was hungry, so I went to beg for food...”

I didn’t want to tell Reggie that I’d been hunting for scraps, but had I tried to keep it a secret, he would have found out later anyway. When I told him the truth, he gave me a helpless smile.

“Oh, Kiara, you’re such a child. Alright, hold on tight.”

“Huh? Oh!”

No sooner had he told me to grab onto his shoulders than he picked me up, one hand under my knees and the other around my back.

Compared to the last time he’d carried me, it felt like I was more snugly wrapped up in his arms... which was *super* embarrassing. It was

probably because he'd grown much bigger than me over the past two years.

What's more, with how close his face was, I could see Reggie's lips at point-blank range.

That reminded me of how I'd suspected him of kissing me, and I hung my head, suddenly feeling very shy.

"Umm, just let me rest a little bit longer, and I'll be able to walk on my own!" I tried to convince him to put me down, but Reggie wasn't having it.

"It certainly didn't look that way."

"Okay, but, uh... what if I start to feel sick and vomit all over you?! That would be a disaster!"

"I don't care. I wouldn't get mad over the involuntary reaction of a sick person, so don't worry. Here, you'll be more comfortable if you lean a little closer."

Reggie lifted me up a bit, adjusting the placement of his arm so that my head rested against his shoulder.

Oh noooo... This is definitely more comfortable, but I can feel my fever getting worse!

Reggie promptly began to climb the stairs. Amazingly, he didn't seem bothered by the extra weight at all.

Wait, Reggie doesn't think I'm heavy, right? I don't know what I'll do if he does.

That was when it hit me.

What about Cain? He definitely knows how much I weigh by now! Nooooo! That's it, once I'm over this fever, it's time to go on a diet!

While I quietly fussed, Reggie made it up to the third floor and arrived outside my room.

After giving it a practiced knock, he opened the door. Inside were Maya and Cain, who must have come to check on me.

"Where did you go, Kiara?" Maya asked.

"She was hungry, evidently," Reggie answered with a chuckle, then laid me down on top of the bed. Maya went to work slipping my shoes off.

Once I was tucked under the covers, I felt I owed everyone there a thank you.

"Um, thanks, Reggie. And it was really nice of you to come see me, too, Sir Cain."

"Your fever's gone down a bit. That's good." The corners of Cain's mouth lifted just enough that I could faintly tell he was smiling.

"You mustn't push yourself, Kiara."

"It's just as His Highness says. You have no business walking around when your fever is still so high. Would you like some water?" Maya offered.

Maybe because I'd been walking around so much, or maybe because my fever had gone back up, I was feeling pretty thirsty, so I took her up on her offer. I sat up just a bit, took the glass from Maya, and drank.

The lukewarm water felt nice and cool on my throat. Drinking it cleared some of the fog in my head, and I finally managed to pull myself together.

Once I handed back the glass, Maya set it down on the table, then began soaking a cloth in a tub of water. She must have brought it along to help deal with my fever.

Suddenly, Cain came to my side and extended a hand toward me.

"Oh, Miss Kiara, you spilled a little."

I must have let a little water dribble past my lips.

Before I could wipe it away with my hand, his fingers brushed against the corner of my mouth.

A shiver ran down my spine.

Because once Cain was done cleaning the edge of my mouth, for just a split second, his fingers wandered toward my lips.

When my eyes widened, Cain asked, "Is something the matter?"

I gaped at his nonchalant expression, as difficult to read as ever.

I had to assume it was just an accident. He'd just *happened* to touch them. Otherwise, I might never be able to hold a normal conversation with him again.

"N-No, it's nothing." With a slight shake of my head, I dropped back down on the bed and pulled up the covers to hide my face.

"You should get some more rest. I'll come back in a little bit, Kiara."

Maya, who had been busy wringing out the cloth after soaking it in the tub, placed it on my forehead and gave me a friendly pat.

However, just before she ushered Reggie and Cain out of the room... I noticed Reggie fixing Cain with a questioning gaze, and Cain uncharacteristically returning his stare head-on.

Not long after that, they left.

My condition was steadily improving, so perhaps it was no longer necessary for someone to stay with me all the time; last of all, Maya exited the room, and I heard the sound of the door locking behind her.

I wanted to reflect on why Reggie and Cain had been acting so strangely, but my fever-induced drowsiness made it hard to concentrate.

"I see, so *that's* what happens. Eeeheehee!"

For some reason, Master Horace's trademark cackle felt extra ominous today.

Interlude: Her Bloodstained Hand

A certain woman strolled past.

The servants standing in her path quietly moved to the sides of the corridor, fell to their knees, and waited for her to pass. In their matching black uniforms, the women looked like shadows crouching along the edges of the hall.

When one young servant noticed something dripping from the woman's hand onto the white marble floor, the girl opened her mouth to cry out.

At once, the elderly servant by her side clamped a hand over her mouth. It would be one thing in the main residence, but here in the east wing of the royal palace, no one was allowed to say anything.

This was the queen's palace.

No matter what their master did, no matter how she looked, no one was to speak to her—so long as they valued their lives, that is.

Ever since she had married into the royal family four years ago, Queen Marianne had always worn a Llewynian-style gown tied with a sash. On the train of her dark green dress, a black stain was forming from the blood trickling down her right hand.

One half of her reddish hair, a common trait among Llewynians, was pinned up haphazardly, while the rest of it spilled down her back. As the most exalted woman in Farzia, she had more opportunity to dine on gourmet food than anyone, but you would never have guessed it from her bony figure—which finally ambled out of sight.

Once Marianne was gone, the old lady breathed a sigh of relief and took her hand off the girl's mouth.

"Goodness! You startled me!"

"*You gave me* quite the scare, dearie. Had you offended her in any way, you would have found yourself on the receiving end of a lashing. You must be more careful," the old woman chided her.

"Thank you for stopping me. I was so surprised, I couldn't help myself," the young servant replied between gasps, head bowed.

Then again, she *had* heard the stories of the queen's wounded hand.

Queen Marianne would sometimes injure her hand. She liked to personally feed her pet bird, and when she did, it would peck at her hand.

Thus, her hand was always covered in cuts and scratches.

“Lately, it’s been especially frequent.”

In the past, her injuries had always been relatively light, but more recently, she wouldn’t even staunch the wounds, allowing the blood to flow freely from her hand as she wandered the palace.

At that, the servant girl shuddered and said, “Now that I think of it, a friend of mine mentioned she saw it happen once.”

Whenever a servant came inside their room to clean, nobles would typically ignore their presence and continue about their business. So, like always, Queen Marianne had replaced the bird feed herself.

The bird was a little large for a pet, but the cage that held it was as tall as a person and too wide to hold in the arms, so she had to stick her entire arm inside to reach the feed box. The bird didn’t much like that, so it would peck at the queen’s hand.

It ought to have hurt, but the queen had simply laughed in delight.

Even as her skin tore, even as blood flowed from her hand, she had simply watched as the bird abused her hand.

“My friend said it was almost like... she was offering up her own blood.”

Why would the queen keep enduring such a thing? Nobody knew. If her own attendants asked her, they too would only be chastised, so they had long ceased to comment on it.

At that point in their conversation, another nobleman passed by, so the two servants hushed up and rushed back to their posts.

As she walked down the hall, the old woman mused aloud. “Ever since Lord Patriciél’s visits became more frequent, there’s been no sign of Lord Credias... It could be connected to what’s happening on the battlefield, so I do so wish I could send word.”

For a moment, she stopped walking and heaved a sigh.

She’d wanted to send a messenger bird from the royal capital, but any movement in and out of the prince’s palace was strictly monitored, so there was no room to do that. The best she could do was pose as a servant in order to skulk about the rest of the royal palace.

Moreover, anyone leaving the royal palace was inspected on the way out, so she would instantly be exposed as the prince’s attendant, Mabel.

Rumor had it that Évrard had withstood Llewyn’s attack. Prince Reginald was unharmed. Apparently, a spellcaster had appeared to back the margrave.

Although it was a relief to know that he was safe, she couldn’t relax. Given his position, Reginald had no choice but to stop the Llewynian army’s march on the capital.

Mabel desperately wished he would run away. If only she could

tell him there was no need to bear any more suffering, help him escape to a friendly nation, and let him live out the rest of his days as an ordinary knight.

Unfortunately, his striking silver hair would serve as a target for all those chasing after the prince.

After losing his father and witnessing the persecution of his mother, surely he had no love left for the royalty of Farzia. But tragically, the color of his hair drew a link to the royal family that kept the prince tethered.

All Mabel could do was gather information in hopes that she could one day pass it on.

The reason she had once again slipped out of the prince's palace was to search for the king, who had yet to show his face since issuing a call to arms against Llewynne and appointing a general.

Mabel theorized that Llewynians were holding the king captive somewhere. If she had the opportunity, she needed to rescue him.

Of course, as far as her personal feelings went, Mabel had no interest in saving the king. But so long as he was missing in action, the queen could run the country on his behalf.

The queen had already begun to dictate various matters herself under the pretext that the king was in poor physical health. Her meddling was to blame for the unprecedented amount of trouble the general sent to intercept the Llewynians was having in gathering soldiers.

On top of that, because they were granted the queen's permission to visit, those who had passed through Llewynian ranks without issue—namely, the count of Patriciél—weren't being vetted at all. On the contrary, he would come and go from the royal palace like he owned the place.

Still, no matter where she'd searched over the past few days, Mabel hadn't managed to find the king anywhere in the royal palace.

Thus, she had made her way to the queen's palace.

While she made a show of cleaning and sweeping, she gradually moved deeper and deeper into the residence.

She failed to find anyplace suspicious.

By now, she was worn out from her search, but when she saw a nobleman passing by, she ducked inside the chapel to hide from him.

So long as no service was being held, the royal family's chapel was off-limits to everyone but the priests. Once she had escaped the man's notice, Mabel made to leave the chapel—and then she froze as the smell of blood reached her nose.

From that day on, a new rumor spread among the servants:

The king had already been killed at the hands of the queen.



“Hehehe... Have you heard? There are rumors in the air that I killed my husband. Dear me. Do you think perhaps someone stumbled upon *that*, Owen?” Queen Marianne addressed her visitor, Count Owen Patriciél, with a smile.

The queen seemed neither incensed nor offended by those rumors. She spoke of the matter almost as if it were someone else’s affair.

His stern face set in a frown, the count replied, “Must you continue to damage those beautiful fingers of yours, Your Majesty?”

As he rose to his feet and came over to where Marianne stood beside the birdcage, the count clasped her right hand in both of his. With a giggle, Marianne pulled her hand away.

“Beautiful? What beauty is there to fingers that have become little more than skin and bones?”

“No, I assure you they are *most* beautiful.” The count knelt down on the spot, lifting the hem of her dress to place a kiss upon it. “You are no less radiant than the first time I laid eyes on you, Your Majesty.”

“Meaning you still see me as a foolish girl of thirteen? You absolute imbecile.”

The look in Count Patriciél’s eyes as he stared up at the queen was so earnest that Kiara would have been shocked to see it. However, she did not return his gaze.

She simply continued to watch the green bird in the cage, her smile unfaltering.



Chapter 2: Fate Closes In

In the end, it took a week for my temperature to go back to normal.

Of course, in this world, a week was the typical recovery time for a cold. That meant I'd gotten off with the equivalent of getting sick and being stuck in bed for a bit.

While I was down for the count, Évrard's position had changed pretty drastically.

Now that many of the soldiers and residents of the branch estates near Salekhard had fled and joined up with us, we were able to gain more and more information regarding Salekhard's betrayal.

I bore some of the responsibility for the information not getting to us sooner.

During the fight on the hills to drive back the Llewynian army, I had scared off their soldiers with my golem—which robbed us of the chance to take any commander-level prisoners of war, who could have served as useful informants.

Who could have known that crossing swords was so vital to collecting intelligence?

In any case, the trouble in Salekhard boiled down to a succession crisis between two brothers.

The end result was that the younger one had joined forces with Llewyrne and imprisoned his older brother. The younger prince had then taken control of the Salekhardian army himself, and he was now in the process of marching on the royal capital with the Llewynians.

In the RPG, Salekhard wasn't aligned with Évrard or Llewyrne. Possibly just because the game developers hadn't planned that far... but either way, they hadn't been involved.

During the events of the game, Llewyrne had a spellcaster in their ranks; plus, they'd been able to invade Évrard the easy way by simply crossing the border. There had been no need for them to cut a deal with Salekhard.

This time, Évrard was on its guard, so they had to find a different invasion route. That was what led them to solicit Salekhard, I surmised.

When I heard the news, I thought, *Great. So one single mid-boss change, and now the enemy's numbers have multiplied.*

Plus, giving up one spellcaster in exchange for another country's

entire army? We had to be playing on hard mode.

Now that circumstances had deviated from those in the RPG, there was nothing to do but rely on the smarts of Reggie and Lord Évrard.

I, on the other hand, was not very bright, so the best I could come up with was praying to Master Horace. If I remembered right, these clay figurines were an object of worship in prehistoric Japan.

“Please! May fist-sized hail rain from above, and a heavy rain flood all the rivers, and... and lightning suddenly strike down the enemy general, scattering the Llewynian and Salekhardian troops!”

“Begging someone else to fix your problems? What, did the fever make you weak? Eeeheehee.” After hearing out my supplication with an unimpressed air, Master Horace finally went for the throat. “If I had to guess, you’re acting like this because something else’s bothering you. Why don’t you think a little harder about what you can do for yourself? Heheheh.”

Master Horace’s attack dealt me some serious mental damage. “The truth hurts,” as they say.

The thing on my mind was the time someone had touched my lips while I was asleep.

But seriously! Now that the dust of the battle has settled and there’s actually time to think about things, who wouldn’t get hung up on that?!

Not to mention that the culprit was Cain—no doubt about it. If it weren’t him, why would he have chosen *that* moment to reach out and deliberately brush his fingers against my lips?

What I didn’t understand was why he’d do it in the first place.

I wasn’t a *total* idiot. I knew that normally, you wouldn’t do that to someone you weren’t interested in.

And at the same time, I knew it was possible to come on to someone you didn’t have affection for so long as you had an ulterior motive. I just didn’t think Cain was that type of person.

But still...

“Cain *liking* me? That’s just silly.”

What was there to like? Ever since we’d first met, I’d acted like an absolute weirdo. What’s more, I kept babbling about a past life like some kind of nutcase. On the list of people to avoid, I should’ve been right up there with the person going “God came to me in a dream!”

Besides, I had been living in Évrard for two years now, and he had never shown an interest in me before. The only thing that had changed was that I’d become a spellcaster... but I couldn’t imagine him cozying up to me for that reason.

Was he just teasing me? At the moment, that was the leading theory.

Unfortunately, no matter how badly I wanted to clear things up, it wasn’t something I could just go and interrogate him about. If I asked

him point-blank and he told me he was just messing with me, I might cry from the shock. I'd probably start screaming at him to give me back all the time I wasted worrying over it.

And then there was Reggie.

He'd stared at Cain as though he were searching for answers. I'd sensed a chill in his expression back then.

Maybe he was taking a stern stance... you know, as my guardian.

As for me? The fact that Reggie had seen it happen had me wracked with anxiety. I just *had* to know what he'd thought about it.

Maybe Cain had wanted to get a word in with Reggie about something or other... but since Reggie didn't seem willing to listen, he'd used me to egg him on? That seemed like a possibility.

But on the surface, neither Reggie nor Cain was acting any differently. Besides, I didn't believe Cain would *use* me like that.

There was no way for me to know the truth, so I decided to pretend it never happened and focus on the war.

Back to the Llewynians!

By the time I had fully recovered and completed my covert burial of the enemies outside the castle, about two weeks had passed since our return.

We'd received word that the baron of the western territory Delphion had accepted Llewynian forces into his domain while the province of Trisphede had fallen. Moreover, some smaller territories bordering Salekhard had also been occupied, establishing a supply route from the neighboring country.

It was already bad enough that the nobility of our own country was cooperating with the enemy; at this rate, the Llewynian army would arrive at the royal capital unhindered. Unfortunately, while the king of Farzia had issued a call to arms to crush the Llewynian army, the man himself was nowhere to be seen.

Even so, the Évrard army couldn't spring right back into action.

This wasn't an RPG, so everyone didn't recover their HP as soon as we left the battlefield. Most cuts would close up in about a day, but fractures, infections, and deep gashes would take more time to heal.

The injured couldn't come along on military expeditions, so we would only be able to bring along those who had recovered by the time we set out.

Then there was the matter of the reinforcements Reggie had borrowed from the two branch estates. They had returned to their territories for the time being.

Since they had rushed to comply with the request on such short notice, they had only made preparations for a short-term trip. Currently, the plan was for them to meet up with Reggie during his march toward the royal capital at a later date.

However, if we intended to oppose the Llewynian army, whose ranks were growing thanks to the aid of nobles like Lord Patriciél, our forces were still far too small in number.

Therefore, Reggie and Lord Évrard decided that we should send envoys to the nearby territories one by one, asking for their help.

As things stood, there wasn't much else we could do.

We would wait to hear back from each territory. If the prospects looked good for assembling and organizing enough soldiers, the Évrard army planned to seize control of the territories that had double-crossed us, with Reggie as our emblem.

Everyone was moving forward with preparations for a long expedition—all to defeat Llewynne and keep our country from falling into their clutches.

In the midst of all that, the aftereffects of our changing circumstances caught up to us.

“More news from Cassia.”

Another knight of Évrard, Lyle, briefed Lord Évrard and Reggie.

I was listening in as well, seated on the sofa with Lady Évrard. Reggie and Lord Évrard occupied the sofa across from us.

At the moment, Évrard was receiving a steady flow of knights and soldiers from Llewynne-occupied areas who wished to join under our banner. According to Lord and Lady Évrard, they had heard that we'd successfully driven back the Llewynian army and were about to head to the front to finish the fight.

“As of now, most of them are coming from Cassia. The Llewynians didn't want to cause a food shortage immediately upon their conquest and invite a grudge, so they've avoided razing the fields to the best of their ability... but we've still received more farmers applying to our ranks than expected,” Lady Évrard stated.

“Those who most often respond to our calls to arms are those who most strongly perceive Llewynne as an enemy. I've heard that in some areas, if the Llewynians resort to violence or engage in pillaging, the townspeople will rise up with hoes and spades,” Reggie responded, reaching for the tea a servant lady had brought for him earlier.

“I suspect we're seeing fewer people from Sorwen because they perfected their defenses early on,” Lord Évrard suggested.

I nibbled on some baked goods as I listened. I was useless when it came to these in-depth discussions, so the most helpful thing I could do was keep quiet.

After all, I had never learned about the politics or military affairs of this world. I only had up to a middle school education in my previous life, but considering everything I had learned from reading books or watching TV, my knowledge of *that* world probably served me better.

None of it would help me add to this discussion, though. My best option was to listen carefully and get a better understanding of the situation, sipping tea and eating snacks while I was at it.

“Furthermore, these were addressed to you, Your Grace.” Lyle held out two rolled-up letters tied neatly with ribbons.

“You don’t suppose we could send them back?” Reggie quipped with a wry smile as he took them.

“My, they certainly are making light of the circumstances. Which provinces were so insolent as to send you these, Your Highness?” Lady Évrard looked on with a dour expression. Her anger was apparently directed at the authors of the letters, not Reggie.

“One is from Bertrand, it seems. Honestly, how brazen. No doubt they’re out to take advantage of our situation, pushing their daughter onto me in exchange for sending us more troops.”

“Very perceptive, Your Grace. That is almost exactly what it says, when summarized. This one even included a heartfelt letter from the lady herself.”

Reggie’s response finally clued me in to what the letters were. They were marriage proposals.

Since one of them included a love letter from the would-be bride, there was a chance it wasn’t *just* a political move; the nobleman’s daughter might have had real feelings for Reggie.

I mean, I could see why. Reggie was handsome, kind, and the perfect picture of a prince. Though sometimes he was just my incredibly terrifying guardian.

Plus, it guaranteed a successor to the throne, so there had to be many daughters of nobility whose affections were influenced by their parents, urging them to attract Reggie’s attention.

All the talk of Reggie getting married struck me with a realization.

After evading his preordained death during the siege, Reggie had obtained a life beyond that point. If we went on to defeat Llewynne like in the RPG, he would one day ascend the throne.

Once peace reigned, he would no doubt continue to garner respect, and even more girls would have their hearts set on him. Praised as a heroic king, the nobility’s loyalty to him would grow stronger than ever.

If he officially acceded to the throne, he would have to protect our war-torn country by marrying an influential noblewoman... and his life would continue on down that path.

Maybe Cain would continue to serve at Alan’s side. Since he hadn’t lost his parents, would Alan spend his days at the royal palace, aiding his good friend Reggie?

If that happened, what would *I* do?

Lord and Lady Évrard would let me remain here, for sure.

I may have become a spellcaster, but so long as I didn't get myself killed, I could live out the rest of my days in peace—just what I'd been dreaming of almost two years ago.

My life wouldn't be in any danger, and I wouldn't be forced to marry. With the kind of power I'd gotten my hands on, I could stay single for the rest of my life, if that was what I wanted.

But still...

Once the briefing had come to an end, I left the room and headed for the stables.

Now that I had become a spellcaster, I didn't have to do an attendant's work anymore, but I'd been given a new job instead.

Most of my tasks involved construction work. My specialty was earth magic, so what else could I expect?

Today, the plan was to do some nice and easy work building a wall along the border.

As I left the manor, I started up a conversation with Master Horace, who I was carrying around my waist. "Say... there have been instances of spellcasters being employed by the state, right?"

"Well, it's not unheard of. But in most cases, it's just a short-term arrangement."

"How come?"

Master Horace gave a villainous cackle. "No matter how amazing their military exploits are, plenty of people don't take kindly to those who've made a so-called deal with the devil. Spellcasters are people who weren't born into their rank, whose skill can't be measured by the sword, who can do something most people aren't capable of... An unfathomable existence as fearsome as a ghost. In the best-case scenario, they let the king sweet-talk them into staying at the royal palace, then they find themselves branded a pawn of the devil and extinguished. Ohohoho!"

"What? No way!"

Part of me didn't want to believe that something like that could happen.

On the other hand, I could see it.

In all likelihood, the support of Reggie and the rest of my friends wouldn't be enough. If I chose to move into the royal palace as an aide, no doubt I would creep out the vast majority of nobles, ladies-in-waiting, and servants.

In that case, I might have been better off taking up permanent residence in Évrard, where I had plenty of sympathizers, and lending the royals a hand whenever the occasional request was made of me.

Imagining that future for myself... was making me feel a little lonely, somehow.

One day, my friends and I would have to go our separate ways.

The moment this occurred to me, a deep anxiety took root in my heart.

When I arrived at the stables, I found Cain waiting for me with his horse.

“Sorry I’m late.”

“There’s no need to apologize. I know that plans have a way of changing.”

Since it wasn’t common practice to walk around with a pocket watch, the people in this world were fairly lax about punctuality. It made things much easier on me.

“Then let me find my—”

Lady Évrard had given me permission to ride a certain one of her horses. I was ready to take it for my first ride in a while, but all of a sudden, Cain wrapped an arm around me from the side.

I nearly toppled backward in surprise, but Cain scooped me up off the ground, one arm under my legs to support my weight.

“Whaaa?!”

I was completely thrown for a loop. The last time he’d snatched me up like this was when he’d needed to carry me around in the heat of battle.

Is the enemy here?! I wondered in a panic, but that was a needless worry.

We were just outside the stables of Évrard Castle. Only the large, round eyes of the horses were fixed on us... or maybe not. An older man working at the stables and a servant girl passing by were stealing glances while they turned their heads and pretended not to see!

Here I was, getting carried like a bride while the people around us turned a blind eye. How embarrassing.

“S-S-Sir Cain! P-P-Put me—”

“This way, it’s easier to take action if something happens.”

Cain shot down my protests, forcing me to sit sidesaddle on his horse. Before I could process what was happening, he swung himself onto the horse behind me.

Cain’s horse had worn a two-seater saddle ever since he first started accompanying me. I usually only felt the hard thud of chain mail whenever my head bumped up against his chest, but today I could feel the warmth of his body seeping through his clothes... which made this position all the more awkward.

I came close to blurting out, *Boys and girls should really maintain a safe distance!*

Still, Cain was helping me out of the kindness of his heart. I was almost ashamed of my indecent thoughts.

When I started to wonder why I was so hyperaware of our proximity today, it stirred up the memories I’d been trying to forget—

about how I suspected him of kissing me.

Urk... Don't even go there, Kiara!

Undeterred by my inner turmoil, our horse trotted onward.

We arrived at the border about thirty minutes later, during which time I managed to calm down a fraction. My heart rate remained normal even as I took Cain's hand to help me down from the horse. Together, the two of us looked out at the small stone fort built along the border.

The national border ran along a river that wound around a rocky mountain. Though the border wall was fairly long, nature had provided its own fortress in the form of the riverside cliffs, carved out over the course of many long years, so it hadn't been built very tall.

Past the gate wall, there was a stone bridge that had been built in ancient times. The problem here was that even if we destroyed the bridge, the wide but shallow river could be forded either by foot or by horse.

The wall was still standing strong, and thornbushes grew rampant over the parts of the cliff top where there was no wall, so it wouldn't be easy to scale. However, if someone burned away the bramble, it wouldn't be impossible, either.

That was where I came in.

"Okay, time to get building!"

I pumped my right arm enthusiastically, then placed both hands on a nearby boulder.

I'd gotten pretty used to sculpting dirt, but I'd never moved a boulder before. I decided to use this chance to try my hand at it and get some practice in.

Mana dwelled even within rocks. According to Master Horace, mana was infused in all things.

The boulder began to warp and bend to my will. I felt more resistance than I normally did with the dirt; the density of the material seemed to make it less pliable.

Straining my shoulders forward, I finally managed to transform the boulder into a doll-like shape and set it into motion.

Not moving along with it was another part of my training. Perhaps the reason the doll was shuffling along so slowly was because I kept both hands on the ground while I chanted, "Go! Move!"

Once the stone doll reached the edge of the cliffs, I remotely molded it to make it rectangular. It came out a little crooked, but I chose to think of it as a charming quirk.

After repeating the process several times, I slowly got the hang of moving the rock golem—and that was when I was cut off.

"That's enough for today, Miss Kiara."

I insisted on going at it a little bit longer, only to end up

crumpling on the spot from exhaustion. Cain swiftly stepped in to take me home.

Even with Cain giving me a ride, I was too tired to think about anything, so I didn't overheat my brain with worries like I had on the way there. Thank goodness.

The soldiers of the border patrol were ecstatic that I'd extended the wall in almost no time at all, so the whole excursion was a resounding success.

We returned to the castle with a sense of accomplishment, greeting the gatekeepers on our way in, though they were busy with identity checks amid the crowds of people coming and going.

After bringing our horse back to the stable, we were heading into the manor when we happened upon a knight of Reggie's with sandy blond hair, Felix, who had a piece of advice for us.

"Greetings, Lady Kiara, Wentworth. I suggest that you avoid contact with the guests in the manor right now."

"Avoid them? Why?" I tilted my head to one side, mystified.

Felix gave a wry smile. "We've been visited by knights from Trisphede."

"What a nuisance," Cain muttered softly.

What's so terrible about that? I wondered, before Felix explained it to me in a whisper.

"It's too suspicious."

"Oh... really?"

I understood that we had to be wary of outsiders, but I wasn't sure what they'd done to warrant *that* level of caution.

"Hardly any time has passed since we received news of the fall of Trisphede. All the roads out are being monitored by Llewyn at the moment, so it's hard to believe they could reach us in such a short amount of time."

If they were merchants or farmers, it would be more believable, apparently.

It was easy to make sales on the front lines, so it wasn't uncommon for merchants to trail behind an army. As such, merchants could be found loitering about in any given country, and they were rarely accosted for doing so. Still, they *would* occasionally come under suspicion and be killed, so it was a risky business.

However, for those easily identified as knights, it wouldn't be so easy to slip through—and that was Felix's point.

"The report that Trisphede had been occupied was delivered to us by bird from the nearby province of Sorwen. Assuming the knights managed to flee, they made it here far too quickly."

Cain and Felix were of the same mind on this.

In that case, it seemed like the easiest solution was to turn them

away at the gates, but dismissing them wasn't an option.

They were knights of a tragic land, supposedly here to overthrow Llewynne after their home was stolen from them. If we turned away anyone remotely suspicious during our recruitment efforts, it could give an unfavorable impression to everyone else who had fled here from occupied territories.

If news passed from one person to another and it eventually gave us a bad reputation among the lords who might otherwise cooperate with Évrard, it would make it a lot harder to gather the soldiers we needed.

Right then, I heard footsteps approaching.

From where we were standing in the entrance hall, we spotted four knights coming down the stairs, so we migrated elsewhere.

Cain pushed me from behind, ushering me deeper into the first-floor corridor.

As a result, I only caught a glimpse of their faces. My first impression was of their hardened expressions.

I went straight back to my room in the castle. After that, I discussed my current proficiency level with Master Horace.

Incidentally, Master Horace told me he had an affinity for wind magic. That checked out; the majority of the monsters he'd herded were wind types.

Apparently, he'd controlled them by making the monsters ingest a contract stone he'd turned into sand, then taking in a small sliver of the same stone himself.

"Contract stones aren't extracted the same way as your average mineral. Eeheehee."

"Do they just spring up somewhere?"

"It's the same as a gemstone in the sense that you extract it from rock. But they're always at least the size of a fingertip, so you can dig it out by itself. It's not like a mineral settled deep in the vein."

Apparently, it wasn't just an ordinary stone.

Minerals were formed from materials melted in magma, or by sediment building over top of something very old and compressing it... or something like that. If it was melted, it would turn to slush, and if it was compressed, it wouldn't maintain a fixed size.

The way that it retained its form made it more like a fossil.

When I spoke my mind, Master Horace seemed delighted, responding, "That's an interesting thought. Eeheehee."

While we were talking, the sun started to set. I headed off to go use the bath.

Once we set out on our expedition, I wouldn't get many chances to bathe. Thus, I asked to have one drawn for me while I still could, determined to enjoy it for all it was worth.

When we'd been driving back the Llewynians a couple of weeks earlier, the demoralizing no-shower lifestyle I'd been forced to lead nearly crushed my spirit.

It was a girl's natural desire to want to keep clean. While bathing was still less routine than in my past life, it was custom among the nobility of this world to wipe down one's body or douse oneself in water before bed, both to stay clean and to stave off illness. That made the experience all the more painful for me.

For the record, Évrard Castle had a fixed bathing area rather than a bathtub that was carried from room to room. A room close to the well had been turned into a bathroom, in which there was a large tub that could be filled with water and then warmed up by adding heated stones.

It was a good thing, too. If someone were to have to bring hot water all the way to my room, I'd feel so guilty I wouldn't be able to enjoy the bath.

After I came out of the bath feeling refreshed, I ran into Reggie on the way back to my room. In contrast to my ultra-relaxed loungewear, he was dressed sharply in a long coat.

Reggie looked at me with a disapproving frown.

Um, did I do something wrong? Worried that the issue was the way I was wearing my towel around my neck, I slipped it off and held it in my hand instead.

"You shouldn't walk around with wet hair, Kiara."

Then he reached out and brushed a hand against my hair. The way my hair moved faintly tickled the nape of my neck.

Uhh... is he worried I'm going to catch a cold?

There weren't any hair dryers in this world, so the only option was to let my hair slowly air-dry near the fireplace. However, we were about to enter the middle of summer, so I hadn't thought that was necessary.

But apparently, that wasn't what Reggie was getting at.

"If possible, I'd like you to wear something over your head when you get out of the bath. Wet hair makes you look more mature than usual, so you shouldn't let any other men see you like this."

With that, Reggie bid me good night and took his leave.

I was so taken aback that I just stood there with my mouth hanging open. Including my past life, it was the first time I'd ever been given that kind of advice.

"*Other men?!?*" I blurted aloud.

I shouldn't let other men see? OTHER men? In other words... he didn't want anyone *else* to see? Having someone treat me like any other adult woman threw me so off-balance that the language center of my brain was short-circuiting.

I was still in a daze when I made it back to my room.

Master Horace cackled. "What's wrong? Did the inside of your head boil, too? Eeeheehee."

For once, I had no rebuttal.



No matter the discipline, slacking on one's training meant growing rusty.

Thus, whenever Cain found a spare moment, he would go join the knights and soldiers sparring in the courtyard. Both the knights of the margrave's estate and the prince's royal guard would do the same whenever they had the time, so there were always people crossing swords in the square.

Particularly now, in the midst of a raging war, everyone was intent on improving their skills.

The flow of knights from other provinces made everyone twice as eager. It meant new opponents to fight against, so many saw it as the perfect practice opportunity.

After Cain escorted Kiara home and made his way to the courtyard, a familiar figure raised a hand to greet him.

"Well, if it isn't Wentworth!"

It was Chester, who likewise served as Alan's knight-guard. The dirty blond smiled, wrinkling his lightly freckled nose.

"Out protecting our little spellcaster again? Good show."

"Oh, has the spellcaster's watchdog been relieved of his duties for the day?"

The prince's knight, Felix, had arrived ahead of him as well. The sandy-haired man was close in age to Cain. If memory served, he was 22 years old.

"We've finished reinforcing the border wall. She should be resting for the remainder of the day."

"No surprise there. Unlike Maya and Clara, she's a weak little thing. Plus, she was laid up in bed just the other day." Chester then added that she seemed no stronger than the average girl, nodding sagely at his own observation.

Cain was tempted to protest that the attendant duo wasn't a fair standard for comparison.

"You're a lucky one, though. The rest of us have no one but men to keep us company. Only *you* get to work alongside a cute girl."

"Right you are. Though I wouldn't say he has it easy," Felix said with a laugh.

Aside from Groul, Felix was the man most often found by Prince Reginald's side, so he'd had plenty of chances to witness Kiara in action.

Chester, too, began to chuckle in spite of himself, recalling the sight of that “weak little thing” controlling a colossal golem.

If only they’d known about everything else she’d done, they wouldn’t have found it so surprising.

But who could imagine that, rather than lamenting how no one trusted her, she had rushed out into the night to find a spellcaster, determined to prove her claims herself?

At the time, Cain had assumed she’d fled the castle in despair. However, when he’d found her, she hadn’t wanted to return home; she’d wanted to continue her search.

Cain had always found the margravine and her two attendants worthy of respect, but he never expected to meet a woman he admired even more than them.

“So, how are things going?”

“What ‘things,’ exactly?”

“Between you and the spellcaster, of course! You were with her all day today. The two of you have been getting on fairly well, haven’t you?”

“I would certainly hope so. If she didn’t trust me, I wouldn’t be able to do my job.”

“Come now, Wentworth, you know that’s not what I meant! For just once, could you share something more interesting than accounts of your kills? Think of my needs! Tell me, what caught your eye about her? What compelled you to stand by her side? I heard that you’re the one who asked His Lordship for the task.”

As Chester badgered him to spill the details and provide a little entertainment, Cain nearly heaved a sigh.

Of course, he couldn’t tell them about Kiara’s past life. Cain knew full well how ridiculous the story sounded.

He had simply wanted to believe that she wasn’t the cunning sort who would lie and mislead others... and that there was indeed someone out there who could see the future and save lives as a result of it.

“You *do* seem unusually protective of her.” Even Felix was getting in on it now. “Of course, no one cares for her quite as much as His Highness.”

Cain declined to comment. Unfortunately, it must have been too juicy a topic, because the other men refused to let it go.

“There’s definitely something going on there, right?” Chester muttered, turning his gaze to Felix, who shot back a wry smile.

Felix had witnessed the prince’s overprotective behavior far more often than Chester. That made it all the harder for him to answer that.

“And yet... I don’t understand what His Highness is thinking,” Cain pondered aloud.

“About what?”

“Does he want to protect her, or does he want her to fight by his side?”

Felix’s eyes widened in surprise. “It’s always looked to me like he wants to protect her.”

“Then he ought to deny her the chance to fight. There are plenty of ways he could do that.”

If he didn’t want Kiara out on the battlefield, he should have shot her down more firmly. And yet, the prince would always respect Kiara’s wishes in the end—no matter how strongly he opposed them.

Right down to the burial of enemy soldiers, which he would never perform otherwise.

If she was truly precious to him, he ought to keep her locked away safely. Yet here they were, about to head out on a military expedition, and she was to join them on the battlefield.

All because Kiara herself wished to fight.

That was why Cain had made a show of touching Kiara. He hadn’t expected much... but he’d wanted to see how the prince would react. Would he worry for her safety and shut her away?

However... Prince Reginald had done no such thing.

Felix suddenly asked Cain, “You aren’t going to stop her?”

“If I were thinking about what’s best for her, I would. But having her there could turn the tide of the battle in our favor.”

Kiara had lived an oddly sheltered life. As a daughter of nobility, she had never seen someone killed until the battle a couple of weeks earlier. Considering how badly she was taking it, he wasn’t sure she would be able to endure the battles to come.

Therefore, as cruel as it was, part of him was relieved that she had chosen to fight in the war regardless.

Still, Cain thought, he would just have to protect her enough to make up for it.



The day of our departure had finally been decided.

At our meeting, Lord Évrard gave us a no-nonsense breakdown of the current situation.

It looked like all the necessary equipment and provisions would be delivered to us in time, and though our numbers only came out to 8,000 due to the casualties from the last battle, we had gathered a sufficient amount of soldiers.

Thus, we would be setting out three days from now. Six days after that, we would arrive at the southwestern province of Limerick, where we would also meet up with Lord Reinstar’s troops. According to our reports, they had about 7,000 men in total, so our forces combined

would be 15,000 men strong.

There was a good chance the Farzian defectors had boosted Llewynne's numbers by providing them with more soldiers, so that was unnerving to hear. However, according to Lord Évrard, our numbers would come out even in most areas.

After all, the Llewynian army was scattered all over the place.

They couldn't just leave a territory completely defenseless after invading, so they had to leave a certain amount of soldiers behind each time. By now, they'd repeated the process several times over, so even with the extra troops from cooperating provinces, the number of soldiers stationed in each territory wasn't particularly large.

Plus, there were some provinces that had only helped Llewynne reluctantly, so the overall number of reinforcements wasn't expected to be too overwhelming.

It all made enough sense to me. With that, the meeting came to an end.

I took Master Horace and headed outside—or at least, that had been my plan.

"Is there a reason I have to watch you train, Reggie?"

On my way out of the room, Reggie had detained me while he stayed behind to go over the supplies with Lord Évrard. Next, he'd made me accompany him to a meeting with his knight-guards, and after that, he'd even dragged me to one of his training sessions to stay in shape.

What's the point of all this?

"Cain told me he has other business to attend to, so he won't be able to escort you around today. I thought it would be safer to keep you by my side, particularly since I have Groul and the other knights standing by."

Cain had other things to do. He couldn't stick around me *all* the time.

So this was to protect me? Okay, that part I understood. I assumed he and Cain had taken the opportunity to "conspire" against me while they were discussing the Trisphede knights I'd been warned about the other day.

Thus, I decided to go relax in my room instead, but the moment I declared my intent, I found myself turned back around.

"I'd like to hear a few things from Sir Horace, for my reference."

If he needed Master Horace, there was no reason *I* had to come along. Besides, I was getting uncomfortable under the impassive gazes of Reggie's knights.

I deliberated a bit while Reggie wrapped up some matters with Alan. Once they had finished, I held out my clay figurine for the taking.

“Here, go ahead! He’s all yours!”

“Hey! Who said you could go around loaning me out, kid?” Master Horace protested.

“Sir Horace can’t move on his own, so I’d appreciate it if you could hold him for me as we walk.”

“Oh, he’ll be fine on his own for a day! Look, if you just tie him up here, nobody has to hold him at all!”

Reggie refused to take him off my hands, so I tried to tie Master Horace around his waist.

“That’s not a good idea, Kiara.”

“Sure it is! See, if you attach him to your sword belt, there’s no problem!”

Reggie tried to escape my clutches, but I held him right where he was and began to fasten Master Horace’s strap around him.

Master Horace spoke up from where I’d left him on the ground. “Hey, little disciple? You might want to think twice about being seen in that position. Eeekeee!”

“What?”

That brought me back to my senses, and I finally noticed the pose I was in.

I was crouched down, gripping the belt around Reggie’s waist with both hands, while Reggie’s hand was on my shoulder.

Oh no... I bet this looks like I’m clinging to Reggie, doesn’t it?

When I glanced to the side, I saw Groul averting his gaze. Some of the younger knights had turned away, while others were covering their mouths with their hands to hold in their laughter.

Alan whispered to me from where he stood nearby, delivering the final blow. “You never think before you act, do you?”

“Oh my goood, I’m so sorryyyyy!”

I let go of Reggie and crouched down on the floor in shame. All I’d wanted was to pawn my doll off on him! I hadn’t given any thought to how it’d look to everyone else.

I held my head in distress as I tried to devise a way to escape from this embarrassing situation. When someone grabbed me by the arm, I finally looked up again. Reggie was kneeling by my side.

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s not a problem for *me*. If you want to be with me badly enough to cling on like that, I’ll make sure to keep you by my side all day long.”

“EXCUSE me?!”

While I tried to wrap my brain around Reggie’s crazy logic, he pulled me up and absconded with me once again.

We arrived at the antechamber of Reggie’s quarters.

While he was getting changed, I got wrapped up in a Reggie-centric briefing with a young lord-in-waiting and a servant lady

standing in as his attendant.

Mabel, who usually looked after Reggie, had been left at the royal capital in case fighting broke out. The brunette lord-in-waiting had also worked for Reggie back at the royal palace, so I didn't fully understand the logic there. Still, I figured it wasn't anything worth pointing out.

Once the meeting was over and Reggie had changed into something more conservative, he hauled me along like livestock. It was apparently time for a meeting with the margrave and his wife, and he was trying to bring me along with him.

At that point, I put my foot down.

Not only would Cain be getting back soon, but I assured Reggie that I would stay inside the manor, so he finally backed off.

Nonetheless, I saw from my window that he had placed extra soldiers at the front entrance. The meeting was to be held in the main tower, so I watched Reggie leave as he cut through the courtyard.



That very same day, merchants were constantly coming and going in their carriages, carting their goods around. They were bringing the last few deliveries before the troops' departure the day after next.

In one particular carriage, there rode a boy who had been hired just the other day.

He had fled from a town governed by a northern branch family, desperately begged a merchant to give him work, and started a new job as his assistant. Coming off weeks of hard work he was unaccustomed to, he sunk to the ground in exhaustion once he entered the castle grounds.

At that, someone who appeared to be a soldier offered him a drink. No one else witnessed the boy gulp it down without the slightest hint of suspicion.

A few minutes later, off in a corner of the castle, the boy had undergone a transformation.

Flames erupted from his body.

A nearby carriage toppled over as its horse went into a frenzy, and then burst into flame the moment the tottering boy laid a hand on it.

The merchants screamed and ran, and some castle guards came running over in their place.



I had been gazing out the window, so I noticed the panic right away.

In the scene playing out beyond the glass, a boy had fallen to his

knees and then caught fire, twisting and extending his arms in all directions like a snake.

Some people were running away, badly burned. Others were screaming, "It's a defective spellcaster!"

When I rushed out of the manor, the soldiers standing guard didn't stop me. They must have thought that if we *were* dealing with a defective spellcaster, I was the right person for the job.

A little ways from the building, I placed both hands on the ground.

"Kiara!" Master Horace shouted.

I nodded back, then manipulated the soil from a distance.

The mana in the earth rose up, hiding the half-decayed defective spellcaster behind giant walls of dirt, then dug out a hole under his feet.

Considering the state he was in, he didn't have a life ahead of him. The most merciful thing to do was kill him and minimize the damage. I did what needed to be done, and the flames on the other side of the dirt walls died out.

A wave of relief washed over the castle grounds.

A different sort of bustle overtook the area, with soldiers swiftly moving in to carry away the injured, and the merchants who had been cowering in fear checking on their goods and reporting their casualties.

"Stay back!"

One group of soldiers came within arm's reach of the dirt wall. I dashed through the courtyard to stop them—and that was when it happened.

"Kiara!"

When I whipped around in response to the shout, I saw an arrow flying straight toward me.

It was a miracle that I even caught sight of it... but there was only a split second left before it would reach its target. With no time to run, all I could do was accept my impending death.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cain running toward me. However, he was too far away; he'd never make it in time.

No sooner did I think that than someone seized me by the arm. Then, as if that alone wasn't enough to protect me, he held me tightly against his chest, which was clad in a white jacket.

The same instant, I heard a terribly heavy impact.

Next, I heard a groan. I could see the muscles of his neck straining as he clenched his teeth.

He'd been struck.

The instant I realized what had happened, I felt the blood drain from my body.

Between the familiar scent of Reggie, who had always kept me safe in his arms, and the reality of the situation I had most wanted to prevent, my head was spinning.

“Reggie?! Reggie!”

No! Please no!

The siege was over. The Llewynian troops had given up their conquest of Évrard. That scene from my distant memories—in which Reggie was struck by an arrow and crumpled to the ground—was never supposed to play out.

“Reggie, no! This can’t be happening!”

Reggie didn’t answer. Moaning in pain, he slumped against me as though all the strength had left his body. Unable to support his weight, I fell to my knees.

I didn’t know what to do. Take a look at the wound? Find out where he’d been shot? But... what if I learned that it was too late for him?

“No...”

I was too scared to look. My whole body was trembling, and I couldn’t bring myself to lift a finger.

“Your Highness!”

Someone finally rushed over. He tried to pry Reggie away from me, but Reggie refused to let go. Whoever it was gave up on pulling him away, instead turning his efforts toward doing something about the arrow.

“Pardon me, Your Highness!”

I heard the sound of clothes tearing. He was going to examine the wound.

I shrunk in on myself. I was afraid to hear anything about his condition. How would I go on if I heard he was beyond saving? And yet, the hands I would’ve used to cover my ears, along with the rest of my body, were held fixed in Reggie’s embrace.

Right then, as if he sensed my fear, Reggie’s arms tightened around me.

He was still alive. A tiny bit of the tension left my shoulders with the realization.

The words that finally reached my ears weren’t what I expected to hear.

“But why? He was only shot in the shoulder!”

What did he mean, *but why*? My heart was pounding like I’d run an all-out sprint, and I felt like I could hardly breathe.

“How does it look?” someone asked.

“The arrow isn’t wedged very deep. The archer was at a long distance, so there probably wasn’t enough power in the shot. It didn’t pierce him deeply enough to reach his lungs.”

“Then why isn’t he moving?”

As I listened, the gears in my head finally started to turn again.

The wound isn’t deep. Reggie won’t die?

But why wasn’t he moving?

“Was it poisoned?”

“There’s nothing to do but remove the arrow as quickly as possible. Keep him held in place for us, Miss Kiara.”

When he brought his face close to mine and instructed me on what to do, I finally realized that one half of the conversation had been Cain.

“O-Okay,” I managed to answer, but after crying, my voice sounded small and pathetic. My heart wouldn’t stop thrumming in my ears.

“Bear with us, Your Grace!” someone cried out.

Immediately after, Reggie made a muffled sound in his throat, then his arms went limp.

“Reggie!”

“Your Highness!”

Reggie closed his eyes and lost consciousness, caught between Cain’s arms and mine.

As Reggie’s frame had been blocking my line of sight, I hadn’t noticed until now, but swarms of people had gathered around us. Someone got to work administering first aid, and others brought over a stretcher.

“There’s something coating the tip of the arrow!”

“So it is poison? Someone call for a doctor to draw the poison out!”

“What’s taking the doctor so long?!”

Amid the chaotic shouting, I was pulled away from Reggie, and a few soldiers loaded him onto the stretcher.

That was when it happened.

All of a sudden, I felt winded, almost as if someone had punched me in the stomach.

At the same time, sparks began to fly from Reggie’s shoulder.

“Whoa!”

“Don’t drop him!”

The soldier who was holding up the upper-left corner of Reggie’s stretcher came close to dropping it, which earned him a scolding.

However, the sparks only increased in intensity, and the men lowered the stretcher to the ground in a panic.

Reggie’s shoulder was turning red, as though suffering from a severe burn, and scorch marks were forming on the surrounding clothing.

The only time I’d ever seen anything like it was with a... *Wait!*

Don't tell me he's turning into a defective spellcaster?!

"Master Horace! Could he have absorbed part of a contract stone?!"

"They might've dipped the arrow in the potion and let it harden on the tip. Once it's in your body, a small quantity is all it takes; it's more fatal than poison. The transformation doesn't start right away, so that must be it."

"We have to do something!"

"Normally, only someone who's absorbed the same stone can control its effects inside someone else. That's why we have the mentor-disciple system. Nobody else can—"

"No way!"

We didn't *have* the same stone that had entered Reggie's system. Still, if he was going through the same thing I had when I became a spellcaster, we had to move quickly—otherwise, Reggie would turn into sand and die.

I gritted my teeth and took a step forward.

"Kiara?! Hey!" Master Horace yelled.

Disregarding his objections, I snatched the arrow out of the hands of a dumbfounded knight and licked the tip.

The iron taste of blood spread across my tongue.

The texture was rough; there must have been some sand left on the tip. I didn't know what they had used to harden it into a paste, but an unpleasant sensation lingered on my tongue, almost like I'd licked up some bitter cream.

Ignoring the shocked bystanders, I knelt down beside Reggie and reached out to touch him.



“Ouch!”

Sparks flew and pricked at the tips of my fingers.

There was no time to cry, however. Pain seared along my arm, but I paid it no heed as I placed a hand on Reggie’s back.

His head turned to one side, Reggie’s eyes cracked open a sliver.

“Kiara... It’s too dangerous... Kill...”

His voice was so hoarse it was hard to hear what he was saying, but I knew that Reggie had figured out what was happening to him and was begging me to kill him.

My heart had quailed at the pain, but now, it was dyed wholly in anger.

“Not on your life!” I shouted, then began to guide the mana in Reggie’s body, just as I had sought out the mana in the earth.

The little bit of contract sand I’d swallowed scalded my throat, burning and sizzling as it went down.

In exchange, although its presence was as faint as the moon during the daytime, I gradually picked up on the mana that had entered Reggie’s system. It all seemed to be concentrated in one place—most likely near the wound. There, the magic energy was slowly working to alter Reggie’s body, like flames licking their way through a piece of paper.

I tried to suppress the heat. The process felt like tuning an instrument, using a tuning fork and adjusting the tension in the strings.

It took a good bit of time, but eventually, the sparks began to die down.

Still, the magical power of the contract stone inside him remained red-hot, like a glowing ember, and I was struggling to put it out. At this rate, Reggie’s body would be destroyed bit by bit.

What do I do?

“Master Horace... I can’t get the contract stone inside him under control!” I turned to my mentor for help.

Master Horace groaned. “Oh, so licking the arrow was to take in the same substance... You’ve got no hope of controlling it with that tiny amount you took in. All you can do is dig it out of him. I can’t use magic anymore, so there’s nothing I can do to help you here, kid. It’s up to you whether you give up or not.”

“I am *not* giving up!”

Digging it out of him would mean deepening the wound. Still, it was better than the certain death that awaited him as things stood.

Going by that logic, I gathered up the mana inside him, much like I would when creating my golems.

There was no reaction from the unconscious Reggie.

Before long, the blackened skin near Reggie's wound began to swell. Although I had stopped the spread as quickly as I could, it had still expanded well past the wound. I was afraid that if I cut it all out of him, Reggie would die from blood loss.

As panicked as I was, now that I'd been controlling it for this long, I noticed that it was getting easier to shift the mana around.

A different approach suddenly occurred to me. I took the knife Reggie had given me out of its sheath and made a cut across the back of my hand.

Allowing the stream of blood to drip onto Reggie's wound, I tried to push in from there.

Surely my magic was most easily channeled through my own flesh and blood; that was what had inspired me to use my blood as a medium. Just as I'd predicted, my own mana began to permeate Reggie's body from the wound.

Then, I used my mana to isolate the magic power of the stone—which I'd already managed to suppress to some degree—so it couldn't spread its influence any further. Next, I strengthened the power of my magic... and it began to blend into the part of Reggie's body I'd sectioned off.

I could sense the two manas mixing together, like hot coffee and milk.

Perhaps due to the heat of the magic inside him, Reggie's forehead and nape were beaded in sweat.

It must have been agonizing. Considering Reggie didn't have the aptitude for magic, it had to be even more painful for him than it had been for me. Still, I desperately hoped that he would hold out until the end.

I kept at it, praying with all my might that it would work.

The tips of my fingers hurt, and at some point my hands had become stained with blood, but after enduring... and enduring...

"I did it!"

I quelled the mana of the contract sand inside Reggie. The moment I sensed that I'd succeeded, I collapsed beside him.



When Kiara put her mouth to the arrow's tip, Cain could hardly believe what he was seeing.

The moment she dove right in without a care for the sparks, the corners of her mouth stained red, he should have stopped her.

However, he hesitated over whether that was the right thing to do.

Only Kiara understood magic. Nobody else could tell if she knew what she was doing or if she was rushing ahead blindly.

Cain clenched his hands into fists. He couldn't let her die, but there was nothing any of them could do to shield her from those sparks. And someone had to save Prince Reginald.

He moved to do what little he was capable of.

"Find the assassin! The arrow came from the western side of the castle gates!"

Cain's order spurred the stunned soldiers and knights into action.

"Close the gates!"

"Send our lookout the signal!"

Based on its trajectory, the arrow had been shot from the castle walls. Merchants and other townsfolk weren't allowed up there. The guests staying in the castle shouldn't have been allowed to pass, either.

They'd been careful. How on earth had someone slipped past their watchful eyes?

While he mulled it over, he noticed a change in Kiara's demeanor. Based on her conversation with her master, Horace, Prince Reginald was in the process of becoming a defective spellcaster.

Regardless, he couldn't interfere. The only option was to leave it to her.

He could only watch the sleeves of her dress scorch and her face twist in pain each time more sparks flew. He could only watch her cry "Please don't die" over and over.

Even her master had told her to either give up or leave things to chance, but Kiara just shook her head and gave it all she had, to the point of cutting her own hand and offering up her blood.

At some point, the sparks orbiting around Prince Reginald had begun to die down. Before long, Kiara collapsed, completely spent.

Cain and the nearby soldiers gulped.

Horace yelled, "Hurry! Get them both to a safe place!"

The soldiers rushed to load Reginald back onto the stretcher. Nothing out of the ordinary happened this time, so they hurried into the manor, relieved.

Cain gathered Kiara up in his arms.

Her eyes were closed, and she was panting as if she had just been running for her life. At first Cain figured she was merely exhausted, but then he noticed that every single one of her fingers was tinged red.

"What are these injuries from, Sir Horace?"

Initially, Cain assumed she had been burned by the sparks flying around the prince.

"Take a good look at the tips of her fingers. This disciple of mine pushed herself too far," Horace responded, in a tone that surely would've been accompanied by a grimace if he were capable of one.

When Cain did as Horace instructed, he saw that the nails of Kiara's fingers had grown shorter. No, not just that—a bit of the fingertips themselves had been whittled away, compared to how he remembered them.

"She used up so much of her magic that her body started to disintegrate. Grappling with a foreign contract stone should've been an unthinkable task. He was in a state where there was nothing left to do but watch him turn to sand, and she *forced* him out of it. I can't even imagine how much power that took."

"Is her life in danger?"

Horace lifted his clay hands as if to say, *Beats me*.

"She held out for this long, so she probably won't die. She's lucky this was the worst of it. I wouldn't have been surprised if all her fingers had turned to sand and crumbled away. Of course, even if she'd known the risks, we both know that wouldn't have stopped her."

Horace looked up at Kiara. Cain sensed a sort of pity in his gaze.

"My disciple here will keep on trying to save everyone she's grown close to, no matter what it costs her. If you intend to stay on as her bodyguard, you better keep that in mind, boy. There's always a chance the enemy will use the same trick again."

Cain nodded in response to Horace's warning.

They might try the same kind of tactic again. But what could he do to protect her? It wasn't just Prince Reginald she wanted to keep safe; he and Alan likely fell within the same category.

There was no way she could protect all of them herself—but if she were told to give up, she would never listen. It would probably be easier to go convince everyone else in the world to drop dead.

His head filled with worries, Cain brought Kiara to her room, entrusted her to Lady Évrard's attendants, and joined the search for the culprit.

Their search yielded questionable results.

The shooter had attempted to take advantage of the chaos and escape, only to be stopped by Alan on account of his suspicious behavior. He was one of the four knights from Trisphede.

Said knight was arrested by Alan.

Another one had remains of the same contract sand used on Prince Reginald on his tongue. He turned a section of the wall into sand, then disintegrated into sand himself.

The other two knights managed to escape from the castle.

If soldiers had been the only ones allowed in or out of the castle that day, things would have turned out differently. But on top of all the merchants coming and going, there was the added chaos of people fleeing in fear, standing around panicking, or crying out in pain. The guards were slow to respond, leaving a hole in the castle's defenses.

According to the captured knight's confession, he worked for Lord Credias, who had conquered Trisphede together with Llewynne.

That was when it first became evident that the viscount of Credias had been involved in the occupation of Trisphede. The arrow that had been shot at Kiara, coated in contract sand, was most certainly meant to kill her.

Nobody could heal wounds, not even a spellcaster. Even if she was lucky enough to get away with only a minor injury, there was no one who could negate the effects of the contract stone, so she was sure to die from it. That was why the man had been given that particular arrow to use.

Since Kiara was still out cold, Lord Évrard asked Horace for his thoughts instead.

When the explanation was done, Horace declared sullenly, "The viscount of Credias is a spellcaster."

"What?"

All three of the Évrards went pale. Horace awkwardly scratched at his hip. The grating sound of pottery rubbing against pottery echoed through the silence.

"Why do you think I came all the way to the margraviate to toil away, feeding a bunch of monsters?"

"Because you were hired for the task, no?" Alan responded.

Horace laughed in mockery of himself. "Mmheehee! 'Hired' is certainly a word for it. Right when my guard was down, I was bound by a slave contract. I was forced to swallow a contract stone, you see."

"Truly? All this time, I'd assumed you were simply blinded by greed."

Horace took no offense at Alan's casually cruel remark.

"All I wanted was to live a long life. I didn't have one whit of interest in getting caught up in this war. He stayed out of sight, so I never managed to get my revenge, since I didn't know who had set me up... but it had to be him. He knows far too much about sorcery."



I slept through an entire day.

When I finally woke up, my body felt sluggish, and my arms were wrapped up in bandages to cover the burns.

For some reason, my fingernails were chipped, and my fingers had taken some damage as well. If I hadn't been given painkillers, surely I would be in tears from the torturous pain.

Fortunately, this world had fast-acting, highly effective salves. Thanks to that, my wounds had closed up while I was asleep. It looked like my burns would heal within a few days, too.

The wonders of not-so-modern medicine!

The servant lady who was acting as my surrogate caretaker lamented, "How will you get married now?" Later, Maya told me the wound was my badge of honor for saving the prince. It really drove home how different people's reactions could be.

Master Horace bluntly admonished me for pushing myself too far.

Even so, I didn't regret putting my all into saving Reggie. He probably knew that's what I was thinking, because Master Horace just sighed. "What happened to your nails and fingertips is the consequence of overusing your magic."

"What?"

"In other words, the disintegration of your body stopped one millimeter down your fingers."

He said "disintegration," so they must have turned into sand.

"Look, I already knew you were attached to that prince of yours. But you best keep this in mind: next time you do something like that, you won't get off so easy. Be prepared to kiss your whole arm goodbye. Don't leave whomever you save with a guilty conscience, kid."

"Alright."

I took those words to heart.

The thought hadn't occurred to me when I was fixated on saving Reggie, but if I went overboard with my magic and destroyed my own body as a result of it, Reggie would blame himself most of all.

"Speaking of which, how is Reggie?"

"He's alive... for now, anyway. But he was hit with the effects of a contract stone, as someone without the aptitude for magic. It took all of his strength to readjust his body. He's still out cold."

If he'd had the aptitude, Reggie wouldn't have suffered so much. Then again, that could've led to a different kind of disaster.

He definitely would have decided to become a spellcaster himself. After that, he would use every trick in the book to keep me locked up in Évrard, sitting on my hands until the war was over. That's exactly what I wished I could do to him, so it was easy to imagine him trying the same move on me.

Reggie didn't wake until two days later.

I was called in after the doctor was done with his checkup. Lord and Lady Évrard and the royal guard wanted me to examine Reggie from a magical standpoint.

Felix was standing outside the room. He opened the door for me, and inside I saw Groul standing beside the bed. He looked drained; perhaps watching over Reggie was taking a toll on him.

"According to the doctor, he should be fine. I have just one word of advice for you beforehand."

It was unusual for Groul to go out of his way to speak to me. Was

he angry that Reggie had taken the hit?

“Pay no heed to whatever nonsense His Highness may utter.”

“What?”

“His Highness was right to protect you. Removing our military matters from consideration, jumping to a lady’s defense is simply the right thing to do. No one could have accounted for the peculiar phenomenon that followed. Nonetheless, we are truly grateful that you went to such lengths to save His Highness, Lady Kiara.”

Once he’d said his piece, Groul left the room. After I heard the sound of the door shutting behind him, signifying that I had been left alone with Reggie, I gave a curious tilt of my head.

Nonsense? I thought, frowning.

“Don’t let Groul bother you,” said Reggie, lying awake in bed.

Reggie was looking a little haggard, but he was still as handsome as ever. He was probably still feeling fatigued. He didn’t try to sit up; instead, he just looked my way and smiled his usual smile.

“Never mind that. How are you feeling, Kiara?”

“I’m fine. What about you?”

“Hmm. I think I’m alright.”

First, I decided to check on his condition.

I grabbed his left hand, which was lying on top of the covers, and quickly checked that there were no irregularities in the mana in his body.

Yep, everything seems fine.

“Yeah, it looks like it. What a relief.”

Relieved, I tried to pull back my hand, but Reggie grasped onto it, holding me where I was.

“I heard that you crossed a very dangerous bridge in order to keep me alive. If anything like this ever happens again, I don’t want you to save me.”

Reggie stared long and hard at my right hand, the one he was holding. My fingers were still covered in bandages. The wounds had healed, but Maya had bandaged them for me, claiming that I should keep them wrapped up for a full recovery.

Reggie already knew how I’d sustained those injuries.

“You know I can’t do that. I owe you a lot, and besides, you’re everyone’s emblem.”

“I care more about keeping you out of danger.”

Reggie lifted my bandaged hand and gave it a firm squeeze, which tickled my fingers. I reflexively tried to pull my hand back.

“Hey, Reggie...”

However, Reggie wouldn’t let go.

Somehow, I didn’t want to release that warm, fevered hand of his either.

“You ought to understand. You don’t want to see anyone else hurt, do you? Well, I don’t want a life that comes at the cost of yours. Tell me, is it so wrong that I don’t want to lose you?”

“Of course not. It’s just the same for me. *I* don’t want to lose *you*.”

I knew that Reggie and I both felt the same way—and that neither of us was willing to give in.

And that’s why Reggie resorted to foul play.

“Can you promise me that you’ll put your own life first?”

Reggie’s words, the gloom in his expression, the way he brought the back of my hand to his cheek—all of it pierced me deeply.

But this time, I wouldn’t let him manipulate me.

“No, I can’t. I won’t let you trick me into doing what you say anymore.”

“I’m not trying to trick you, Kiara.”

“Either way, the answer is no. I don’t think I can keep us safe from *everything*, but at least let me protect you for the remainder of the war. In the end, I want to see us all smiling together about how everything worked out.”

Reggie heaved a sigh at my firm refusal.

“You *do* realize there’s no need for me, specifically, to be the emblem, don’t you?”

“I don’t think Alan would be quite as effective at getting the nobles to fall in line, though.”

Alan may have had a claim to the throne, but he was nothing more than the son of a margrave. I had my doubts that they would be quite as willing to answer to him.

In the RPG, where Alan played the role of protagonist, a good amount of time passed between Llewyn’s attack and his departure from Évrard Castle. The time it took for him to win over the people was probably among the reasons why it took him so long to set out.

“That wouldn’t be an issue. We’ve already been guaranteed the support of Limerick and Reinstar. They wouldn’t change their tune now. The other provinces that declared their intent to rally behind us won’t go back on their word, either. All the pieces are already in place. Nobody would back out at the cost of letting Llewyn seize control of the country. Besides,” Reggie went on, “I’m not even part of the story you’re familiar with, am I?”

“What...?”

He’d said “story.”

I hadn’t told Reggie about the RPG. All I’d said was that I had a dream that foretold his and Lord Évrard’s deaths. And yet...

“Wentworth told me. You have memories of living as a different person before you were born. You didn’t have a vague premonition in a dream; you knew that a future following that outline could very well

exist. In the future you know, I die, and Alan is the one who leads the fight against Llewyne. Farzia will be just fine without me, won't it?"

There was nothing I could say. He was exactly right.

But here and now, he *was* alive. Why would he say something like that?

I wanted to argue back, but I was too overwhelmed. After opening and closing my mouth several times over, what I finally managed to say sounded like a child nervously questioning an adult.

"Are you mad?"

"No, I'm not. Quite the opposite; I'm a bit relieved. It's like someone finally told me I can stop running."

His calm and collected expression didn't change. But something about the peaceful look on his face put me on edge. He seemed so much like someone who had given up on moving forward that I was afraid to respond.

"Ever since I was young, death has always lurked nearby." And yet, Reggie kept talking. "At first, I felt the instinctive urge to survive. That's why, even if it was all for show, I pretended to love my father even after he abandoned my mother. I deliberately acted like a silly child with no interest in the throne. I slipped past every danger, pretending I wasn't afraid of anything. Right when, deep down, I had grown tired of everything and was ready to let it all end... that was when I met you."

"You mean... when you went to pick up Alan from our boarding school?"

Reggie had disguised himself as a servant and joined the group sent to bring Alan home.

"My melancholy was apparent, I'm sure. The margravine allowed me to travel with the group, hoping it would lift my spirits. Surely she didn't suspect that I had only gone along to scope out the roads... all so I could run off into the wild."

"You wanted to run away? But a prince could never pull that off!"

I had practice living like a common servant, but even I knew it would be difficult to make it on my own—which is why I had chosen to work for Alan's family. Reggie had lived an even more sheltered life than I had; there was no way he could manage that.

"I didn't put any thought into how to make a living. After all, if I left the royal palace all by myself, someone was bound to come kill me eventually."

"Suicide, then?" I nearly whispered.

Reggie gave a soft laugh. "I didn't care, so long as it meant an end to my trials. And so, when I realized you had stowed away on our carriage, it felt like you were doing exactly what I wanted in my stead."

That was why Reggie had been so kind to me from the start.

In the beginning, while Alan and Cain had sensibly held their suspicious stowaway in contempt, Reggie alone had readily accepted me. Apparently, that was because he'd seen some of himself in me.

"Unlike me, you were powerless, with no options available to you. But even when you learned you'd been drugged, you didn't cry like an ordinary girl would. You just kept moving forward, all so you could survive. When I met you, I finally noticed how tired I was of struggling to live."

Thus, Reggie had decided to bail me out. Perhaps if he watched someone else be saved, he too would once again feel the desire to be rescued.

"And now you won't even let me keep you safe. I've spent a lot of time debating what to do about that. Should I keep you locked away? I thought up plenty of ways to clip your wings. I even considered putting them into action a few times."

It was a terrifying thing to hear, but this wasn't the first time he'd told me that. *So he really DID plan to keep me locked up? I thought that was a joke.*

"But you didn't."

Even when I became a spellcaster and decided to fight in the war, Reggie hadn't stood in my way. He was opposed to my desire to fight, but he hadn't kept me shut up in the castle. He'd let me do whatever I wanted to do.

"Ultimately, you should be the one who determines the course of your own life. You and I are the same—our lives have been influenced by the decisions of others. You ran away because you wanted to make your own choices. I have no desire to rob you of your agency any further."

But Reggie wasn't done.

"Likewise, if I don't want to be saved, that is my own choice to make. You should respect that, Kiara."

"But..."

I wasn't even allowed to keep him alive?

I strove to become a spellcaster all so I could save Reggie and Lord Évrard. That was the entire reason I had decided to fight even if I was afraid to kill people. Wrenching that purpose away from me would be like casting me into an inky darkness where I couldn't even see my own feet.

"I consented to lead the army under the assumption I was needed there. But if it doesn't matter either way, then prioritizing your safety over mine is far more vital to Évrard's victory."

"What do you mean, you aren't NEEDED?!" Before I could stop myself, I leaned toward Reggie and slammed both hands down on the

bed. “Nobody wants you to die, Reggie! How could you say something like that?!”

“Ah, yes. I was sure you and Alan would say something like that. But you need to face reality. Your survival will save the lives of far more of our men than mine.”

Do you want to die at the cost of your allies’ lives? I sensed that question was implicit in his words, and I felt my heart freeze in my chest. Reggie twisted the knife in even further.

“If that’s not enough to make you agree, I have no choice but to use my authority as a prince. I understand that as a spellcaster, you will strive to protect your allies. There is a certain amount I will tolerate. But you are a valuable asset to our army. In a worst-case scenario, I will have my knights prioritize you above all else. I’ve already told Wentworth that you should take precedence, and he agreed to my terms.”

Nobody could defy the prince’s orders. No matter how hard they strove to protect him, if there was a chance I might become a casualty, they would abandon Reggie to come to my defense.

I wasn’t allowed to save Reggie? All because I had become a spellcaster? But if I *hadn’t* become a spellcaster, there wouldn’t be anything I could do. I wouldn’t have been able to protect the castle.

I hung my head, at a loss.

No matter how hard I thought, I couldn’t come up with a way to overrule Reggie’s declaration. So I was left with no choice.

“Fine.”

The word left a bitter taste on my tongue.



He rejected me.

The thought was evident in her expression, and it pained Reggie to see it.

He hadn’t wanted to see her upset. If only he could, he always wanted to see her with an innocent smile on her face, frolicking freely like a kitten.

Despite holding the rank of prince, this was the only way he, Reginald Dias Farzia, could keep Kiara safe. Otherwise, she would continue to throw herself into danger in the name of protecting him.

When he heard her body had begun to decompose, Reggie determined that there was no way forward but to flatly deny her what she desired.

He knew it would sadden her. She had grown more attached to him than anyone. But with this, she would finally stop overextending herself to save him. The thought brought him immense relief.

However, he had one other concern.

Not long after developing a fever, Kiara had begun behaving strangely. Reggie knew that whenever he teased her, her face would turn a delightful shade of red... but this was more than just that. She seemed unusually guarded.

He assumed that something must've happened to cause those overreactions.

Reggie would have Groul update him on Kiara's affairs each time he visited Évrard. Other than the chef's apprentice, there was only one man she was particularly close to.

It was Cain Wentworth, Alan's knight-guard. He had been by Alan's side since he was young, born to a family that had served the House of Évrard for generations.

Wentworth had never shown much emotion on his face to begin with, but it was after the battle with Llewyne that he had stopped smiling altogether. Everyone said it was inevitable; after all, Wentworth was still only thirteen when he lost his entire family in the war.

In the past, Wentworth had shown absolutely no interest in Kiara. The age gap was a factor, too. Surely he'd thought her a child the first time they met.

Yet now he always seemed to be watching her.

That by itself could be explained away by the margrave's orders to act as her guard. Reggie himself had initially assumed as much from Wentworth's level gaze.

However, after Reggie had escorted the convalescent Kiara back to her room, Wentworth had touched her on the lips while he was standing right there.

In the same moment, Wentworth had turned his gaze toward Reggie. Reggie wondered if that was his way of asking for permission.

He had expected something along these lines to happen sooner or later.

Reggie would acknowledge whatever man Kiara chose. That was his *intention*, at least; he still prayed that no shady characters would cozy up to her, and he took his fair share of action to prevent that from happening.

In a way, Kiara was Reggie's one and only.

But now, she had attained the rank of spellcaster. It was more dangerous than ever to allow anyone to get close to her—and now Wentworth was poised to protect Kiara directly. It was difficult for Reggie to fend him off from the sidelines, and he ought to be ordering the man to keep a sharper eye on Kiara, in any case.

What's more, at some point along the way, Kiara had begun to refer to him by his first name. Every time he heard "Sir Cain" in that gentle voice of hers, Reggie's breath caught in his throat.

Pushing those thoughts from his mind, Reggie had broached the subject after he and Wentworth left the room.

"I take it you have something you'd like to say to me. Or was that a simple bit of mischief? If so, I can't say I approve."

With a look even more inscrutable than Reggie expected, Wentworth stated, "I assure you, it was no such thing."

"I see. You're always at her side, so I'm not surprised she's drawn your interest."

Reggie cut to the chase. Wentworth's eyes narrowed.

"I am interested, yes... in her memories in particular."

"What do you mean, her memories?"

"Evidently, before she was born as the person she is now, she lived a different life. She told me that Llewyn's invasion was recorded in a story she read in her past life. Miss Kiara referred to the concept as 'reincarnation.'"

"Reincarnation?"

Reggie had heard the term before. It was the belief that after the body perished, the soul would go on to dwell in another being and walk a new path of life. Wentworth went on, further explaining this "future" of which Kiara had spoken.

In the story she knew, after losing Reggie and the margrave, Alan—the rightful successor to the throne—took control of the army and defeated the queen and her Llewynian troops.

The pieces finally fell into place. Kiara had never seemed to worry much for Alan, even though an invasion of the margraviate should have put him in just as much danger as anyone else.

No wonder she had been so desperate to save Reggie.

When Wentworth was done recounting her memories, he went on, "When I lost my family in the war, I wondered if I could have stopped it, if only I'd known what was to come. Now that I've met someone who can do exactly that, who is doing her best to alter the future she foresaw... is it any surprise that I would feel strongly for her?"

Wentworth may have seen Kiara as his ideal. "If only I'd chosen differently" was something everyone had thought at some point in their life. Kiara was the embodiment of that wish. Seeing her succeed at changing the future—and seeing all the work she put in to make that happen—must have made an impact on him.

Reggie understood that, and that was exactly why he called the man into question.

"Then there's one thing I'd like to ask you, Wentworth."

"What is it?"

"Kiara will mourn the death of anyone, friend or foe. She'll continue to bury enemy soldiers... even after we've suffered great casualties at their hands, no doubt. Will you be able to keep on

protecting her, even as you watch her grieve for the enemy?"

Precisely because she lined up with his ideal, Reggie wanted to know what Wentworth would do when she deviated from it.

Assuming Wentworth's feelings for her went beyond the call of duty... if he couldn't answer that question in the affirmative, he would one day have to leave Kiara's side. Watching her reach out to the enemy would be too much for him to bear.

Had he realized what Reggie was thinking, or did he take it to mean something else? Wentworth didn't answer right away.

After a lapse of silence, what finally left his mouth was a sincere question.

"I see you don't approve of her conduct, either. Yet you still allow it. If you think so fondly of her, why don't you keep her locked away, Your Grace?"

"What do you mean?"

"There are countless ways you could keep her off the battlefield. If you were to simply tie her down, no more harm would come to her. If you aren't willing to do that, then..."

Reggie finally understood: Wentworth had touched Kiara to spur Reggie into action.

However, Reggie refused to interfere in the way he hoped. In fact, part of him even hoped she might open her heart to Wentworth. Perhaps then she would finally learn to settle down—Reggie's best-case scenario.

"You'll keep her off the battlefield for a time because you don't want to see her hurt. But rather than wielding your authority decisively, in the end, you let her have whatever she wants. What exactly do you want for her?"

"Freedom," came Reggie's answer.

He wanted to see her unfettered. Precisely because it was something he could never have, Reggie wished for Kiara's freedom. That was why, no matter how much he might try to persuade her against it, he was determined to accept whatever it was she chose.

Kiara was a more stubborn person than she likely gave herself credit for. Wentworth wanted her to think the same way he did, but so long as she thought it was necessary, she would stand firm against him.

She would look him straight in the eyes and say, "I already made my decision."

Kiara had obtained the power to put her ideas into action without anyone's help. She had become an even more unstoppable force than before.

By now, there was nothing Reggie could do to keep her in check without making her sad.

Deep down, he wanted to bind her to himself. However, after the botched assassination attempt, he realized what a bad idea that was.

Kiara had likewise come to depend on Reggie. He couldn't afford to become any more special to her than he already was—not if he wanted to keep her safe. That was why he couldn't go along with Wentworth's idea to shut her away.

Soon enough, Wentworth would learn it for himself: the only way to protect her was to bring her to tears.

“We've both found ourselves in the same mire. I fully intend to sink, but what of you, Wentworth?”

If either one of them bent her to his will in the name of protecting her, she would lose everything that made her Kiara, leaving him with nothing but her remains. A bird deprived of its wings couldn't be called a bird.

If Wentworth intended to destroy her will, Reggie would tear him away from her.

Even if that wasn't what she wanted.... he would do it to protect her.

Chapter 3: Departure from Évrard

A week after Reggie's recovery, the day of our departure finally rolled around.

Alan was put in charge of the troops. Normally, the prince would be the one with that authority. Unfortunately, Reggie still wasn't feeling up to snuff, so the plan was for him to stay behind and catch up to us later. Thus, in the interim, Alan was given the title of acting general. Game-Alan was the straight-up commander-in-chief, so I was confident he could handle the responsibility just fine.

"This was meant to be my father's job," Alan had grumbled, but Lord Évrard's injuries were too severe for him to join us on a long trip.

The disorientation of being thrust into a position beyond his rank and his regret over not rescuing his father sooner had probably left him shaken.

During the march, I was to be crammed inside a carriage whenever we traveled along the high road. It felt bad to be the only one taking it easy, but when I tried to protest, everyone unanimously argued back, "It'll be worse if we can't depend on you in an emergency."

If I pushed myself too hard and ended up incapacitated by muscle cramps, it was doubtful I would be able to wield my magic to its full potential. That was a fairly likely scenario, so I was to travel in the carriage as much as possible. Whenever I couldn't, I would ride with Cain on his horse.

They weren't wrong to be worried. If I were too exhausted to use my magic, I would be little more than extra luggage.

When we made it to the castle gates, Lady Évrard was there to see us off. She gave me a hug goodbye.

"Come back safe, dear. But in the event things don't go as planned, I have made arrangements to flee the country together with Vayne."

If we should fail, she wanted us to run away together. I couldn't help but laugh.

"Thank you, but I'll do my best to make sure we come out victorious. And I'll bring Alan home safe."

"Then we shall await your return."

Lady Évrard didn't say anything about winning at all costs, nor did she ask me to look after Alan for her. This was a war, so you never

knew what was going to happen until the moment came. She was prepared for the possibility that we wouldn't make it out of this unharmed—both me *and* Alan.

She probably wanted to come with us. But alas, since Lord Évrard was heavily injured, she had to protect the territory in his place.

“Well, off we go!”

I peeled myself away from Lady Évrard and moved on.

The soldiers were already lined up outside the gates. In the center of the formation were Alan and the knights, plus the carriage intended for me. Behind them continued the lines of the soldiers, followed by carriages packed with supplies and commercially minded merchants who planned to join us on the front stretching past them.

“There you are, Kiara.” Alan ushered me toward my carriage as soon as he saw I'd arrived. “Get in. Wentworth is waiting for you.”

“Okay.”

I nodded and walked over to the carriage. The one I was instructed to board was made of wood, making it simple and low-profile.

Cain, who was standing there waiting, opened the carriage door for me like a servant. I took the hand he offered and climbed inside.

The servant ladies had already loaded my luggage onto the carriage. Granted, I only had two bags; one was full of clothes and other items I would need for the journey, and the other was a smaller bag of the bare essentials in case I had to grab it and make a run for it. If I didn't even have time for that, I had some money tucked away on my person along with Master Horace.

Before long, the bugles rang out in harmony, sending vibrations through the carriage windows. As the carriage began to roll forward, I gazed up at the towering castle walls. The doctor had ordered Reggie to stay in bed, so he wasn't there to see us off. Lord and Lady Évrard stood in front of the gates, watching the soldiers leave.

The four days it took to get out of Évrard territory passed without incident. We'd been on alert for Llewynian soldiers who might have infiltrated our ranks, but fortunately, that turned out to be a needless worry.

In the evenings, we would stop close to the larger towns, so I spent the night at inns whenever possible.

After all, I was a lone girl traveling in a pack of men. Even if the majority only saw me as the arcane spellcaster, we couldn't take the chance of someone trying something while I was asleep. It sounded like having me stay elsewhere was a weight off everyone else's minds, too.

One day, when I entered my room at the inn where my bodyguard and I would be staying, an idea suddenly struck me. I sat down at the

desk and took a pen, ink, and paper out of my bag.

The paper was similar to a notebook, its pages bound together with thread. Thankfully, this world had the technology to make paper from plants. It was a low-quality product, made from thick straw, but that was better than nothing.

“Do you have something to document, Miss Kiara?” Cain asked when he came to check on me.

“I’m going to write down everything I know.”

This was one idea of what I could do for Reggie.

I had memories passed down from my previous life. Buried among those memories was information on the placement of soldiers on the battlefield and the location and timing of ambushes.

The circumstances were different now, so there was no telling if the war would proceed according to the script. Since things changed in real time, there was always a chance we could run into an enemy squad while on the march, and it was possible that the Salekhardian army would move in from Trisphede.

Still, I assumed it would be helpful to have the information. Winning our battles would serve to keep Reggie safe.

“The next place we’re sure to clash is Fort Clonfert. There’s a section of the game devoted to fighting the Llewynian soldiers stationed there, protecting a group of Cassian evacuees from bandits near the Tyrone River. Then there’s the battle against some mercenaries in Maynard City...”

Fort Clonfert was one of the first really hard parts of the game. After a fixed amount of time, more enemy soldiers came out of the fort, increasing the number of units you had to fight.

In the game, it happened after ten turns, but I wasn’t sure how much time that would equate to in the real world. There was no way to know, so I just wrote down that the extra enemy soldiers would show up later. Since they came out of the fort to attack the heroes, the battle took place nearby.

If I remember correctly, there were archers stationed here, and foot soldiers and knights over here... The archers’ strength is boosted inside the woods. If we know where they are, maybe we can overrun them by charging in from the side? There were three units stationed here, which probably amounts to thirty or so soldiers. Maybe more?

In an ideal scenario, I would send the enemy packing before more soldiers appeared, but given my stamina and the size of the battlefield, I was bound to run out of steam first. And once the reinforcements showed up, it would get even tougher.

While I scribbled away furiously, Cain stared down at the map with a frown.

I asked him, “What do you think? If we know where the enemy is

lurking ahead of time, can we take them by surprise?”

“Eeeheehee! Gotten sneaky, have we?” Master Horace laughed with delight as he painted me as some sort of devious schemer.

“It’s possible,” Cain replied, considering the idea seriously.

“However, this diagram is too rough to use as a guide. The site is located upstream on a steep slope. It would take quite a bit of time to navigate around the mountainside so that they won’t see us coming.”

“I was afraid of that.”

Not to mention it was much easier to shoot arrows downhill.

“If we know for a fact that they’re going to be somewhere around here, we can send one party out there first and have the rest of the troops lag behind. That way, we can take up our positions before they arrive and lie in wait for them.”

“In other words, we use a delay to our advantage?”

I made a note of Cain’s idea and moved on to the next part.

“Next comes the Tyrone River. This part of the story happens when Alan is traveling in a small group. If he’s marching around with an army of ten thousand men, the bandits won’t come out to play.”

“Good. If we can intimidate them into falling back, we won’t have to worry about a fight.”

“The group of mercenaries in the city isn’t exactly army-sized, either, so the next place we’re likely to have a full-out battle is Cassia Castle.”

“So here it will be our turn to go on the offense. The enemy will have a good deal of archers, I see.”

At Cassia, the only option was to charge in, weaving through the oncoming arrows.

The characters in the game could just use healing items, so it wasn’t such a big deal. But thinking about all the people who might get hurt or die, it was bound to be a grisly fight in real life.

We didn’t have a potion that could make wounds instantly disappear. We *did* have fast-acting salves and great fever reducers, though—perhaps even more advanced than the medicine in my past life. Since magic existed here, I assumed the composition of the world and the creatures living in it was different.

Thus, it was possible to buy some time by stopping blood loss or pain in the middle of a battle. But wounds were wounds, so if someone broke a bone or suffered a severe injury, they were down for the count.

In the first place, how many people were there in one unit? Let’s say about a hundred. In that case, losing half its HP could mean the equivalent of fifty dead soldiers.

Imagining it sent a shiver down my spine. Did healing just mean recruiting new soldiers? You *could* call that a recovery, in a way... but

yikes!

Rambling to myself throughout the whole process, I spent the first five days writing a strategy guide based on my memories.

On the fifth day, we entered the territory of Limerick. There were quite a few soldiers stationed at key points along the border. Unlike Évrard, they didn't always have soldiers at the ready, so among the border guards were a fair number of people who had been conscripted from rural villages.

Perhaps because Limerick was outside the Llewynian army's path, the townspeople gave us some uneasy looks as we marched by, but they seemed pretty relaxed on the whole.

On the sixth day, we finally arrived at Limerick Castle, located southwest of Évrard. The marquis' castle emphasized aesthetics over durability. The white castle walls were a feast for the eyes.

The first ones to come greet us were Lord Limerick and his younger brother, plus the House of Reinstar, who had arrived before us. Lord Limerick was a mild-mannered, older gentleman. Standing next to his younger brother, Jerome, he looked almost a full size slimmer.

First, Alan greeted them on behalf of Reggie. Looking at him from a slight distance, I saw that he had become the spitting image of his game sprite.

Then Alan called for me. Accompanied by my watchful protector, I timidly stepped forward.

"This is the spellcaster of Évrard, Kiara Cordier."

Taken back to my days as a noble's daughter, I gave a formal curtsy.

"Yes, I *did* hear of her from my uncle... What a lovely young spellcaster."

Lord Reinstar stared at me with wide eyes. I could hardly blame him for being surprised; he was in his thirties, so I probably looked like a child to him.

The flattery was nice to hear, too. I'd been scared out of my wits that he would call me a disgrace, or a mere child, or something like that.

Then again, I supposed he was in no position to call me a child. It would be an insult to our acting general, Alan, who was only a year older than me—not to mention our *real* commander, Reggie.

"It is our deepest regret to drive you onto the battlefield, but I'm afraid we have no choice but to call on your help. We are in your hands, Lady Kiara." Lord Limerick, who was even older than Lord Évrard, regarded me politely.

When I had met their relatives back at Évrard Castle, they had also addressed me with respect, so perhaps this was how all noblemen

had learned to behave toward spellcasters.

We were to stay at the castle for two days to hold meetings and stock up on supplies. After that, the plan was to head north and capture Fort Clonfert in Cassia.

Time was limited, so our mealtimes were appropriated for more meetings.

“Fort Clonfert is located just off the high road. It was supposed to be one of Farzia’s most fortified strongholds in the face of a foreign invasion, second only to Évrard, but we can see how that turned out.”

“Évrard sent a post-horse warning them to stay vigilant, but it was captured far more quickly than anticipated.”

Thinking and eating at the same time wasn’t easy on the stomach. Unfortunately, we didn’t have much choice. The commanding officers and higher-ups didn’t have time to rest.

Tomorrow, we would have to go over our formations and battle plans one last time. I was also supposed to hold a demonstration so the soldiers could get used to seeing my magic. We couldn’t have them running off scared when it came down to it.

Thinking back on it, the Limerick and Reinstar soldiers had seemed pretty distraught during the fight on the hills of Dilhorne. The Évrard soldiers had only accepted my magic without explanation because we were in dire straits. They would’ve gone along with anything so long as it bailed us out.

While I came close to getting lost in my thoughts, the conversation pressed on.

“Do we know the whereabouts of the baron of Cassia?” Alan asked.

“New information keeps coming in, so it’s been difficult to pin him down... but it seems he was killed during the invasion of the castle,” said Lord Limerick.

“A handful of townsmen who escaped the attack reported seeing his severed head on display,” Lord Reinstar supplemented with a grim expression.

“I never imagined Cassia would be overrun so thoroughly. It seems the men at Clonfert balked at the defective spellcasters Llewyrne sent out first, only to be pushed back and trampled under their army, and that loss has had lasting effects. At Cassia Castle, some soldiers fled before the battle even began, for fear of magic.”

“Evidently, Llewyrne knows an easy way to make people into defective spellcasters,” Alan commented, and Lord Limerick nodded.

“I only witnessed it for a brief moment at Dilhorne, but it’s only natural that soldiers with no prior experience would be shaken,” said Lord Reinstar’s uncle, Edam, who had fought with us on the hills of Dilhorne.

Defective spellcasters were a pain to deal with, but if nothing else, I was thankful that Llewyne couldn't just mass-produce them.

They'd brought them out at Évrard, when they wanted to take us by surprise and overrun us as quickly as possible, and then at Clonfert, which they'd expected to be their second-toughest battle... but they hadn't tossed any into the fray during their conquest of Cassia Castle, apparently.

Contract stones were rare and valuable, so it was likely only a big shot among the main body of troops and Lord Credias himself who were in possession of one.

Learning that Lord Credias was a spellcaster had made a lot of pieces of the puzzle fall into place. It meant *he* was the one who had made Game-Kiara into a spellcaster. Lord Patriciél had married her off to him as a means of surreptitiously putting her on the path to sorcery.

Lord Credias was on the queen's side. If Game-Kiara had been forced into it by her spellcasting mentor, it was no wonder she fought instead of just running away.

Once dinner was over, I reaped the rewards of staying in an actual building and had a bath drawn for me. Lord Limerick's servants wiped my hair dry with a warm, dry towel.

After tying back my freshly dried hair, I changed into a dress Lady Limerick had prepared for me, then went to see Alan.

In his room, I found Alan likewise fresh from the bath.

"What is it?"

"I want you to take a look at this," I said as I handed him my homemade strategy guide.

"Oh, right... Wentworth told me about this. You wrote down the enemies' battle configurations and the locations of all the conflicts to come to the best of your recollection, is that right?"

"Exactly. Do you think you can use it?"

"Let me see. Hmm..."

Alan studiously looked over my slightly wonky maps and the explanations I'd jotted down.

I was ashamed to show him my horrible drawings. If only I'd had a little more artistic ability, I could've drawn much better maps—but sadly, that wasn't a skill I was blessed with in either this life or my previous one.

As long as it gets the point across, it's good enough, I reassured myself as I waited for Alan's response.

"I doubt the enemy will move exactly as you've written, but I wouldn't be surprised if they were positioned like this."

"Really?"

"If they were to do things by the book, this is about how they'd

station themselves. As far as the numbers go, it's probably not as simple as dividing things cleanly into a hundred men per one of these markers. It'll be dependent on our own numbers. And in close-range combat, archers can take up a sword and be treated as foot soldiers... though they're picked out for their skill in archery, not swordsmanship, so they're not completely interchangeable. Thinking about it that way..."

In the real world, an entire unit could undergo a class change depending on the situation, such as shifting from foot soldiers to archers. And the answer to my question of "How many soldiers are there in a unit?" appeared to be a vague "It depends."

"This is our country, so we have a better grasp on the lay of the land. And if we use this to get a sense for the enemy's formation patterns, it'll be easier for us to predict their movements."

Thankfully, my work hadn't amounted to a bunch of useless doodles. But considering I knew the future and added a spellcaster to our ranks from the get-go, there had to be more I could do to minimize the damage we took. I had to think of something else... something that could allow us to capture the fort with minimal sacrifices.

Unfortunately, there were a couple of issues pertaining to my stamina and the options available to me.

Problem number one: the duration of my magic depended on the size of whatever I made. If it was something small, I could control it for about half a day. But if it was as big as my golem, I could only keep it walking for an hour. If I made it run around or move more dynamically, I would be lucky if it lasted twenty minutes.

If arrows were flying around, or if enemies were slashing at the golem's feet out of desperation, its lifespan would be even further reduced. Every little bit of damage added up.

Problem number two: it would be difficult to go destroy the fort with my golem.

Taking my time limit into account, I would have to sneak as close to the fort as possible before bringing my golem onto the scene. Otherwise, time would run out while I was in the middle of knocking down the fort, and the only thing I'd have accomplished would be intimidating the enemy. Completely spent, I would need Cain to carry me in his arms and make a dramatic getaway through a mob of several thousand soldiers. It was way too risky.

In that case, it would be less trouble to just stay with the rest of the army, run as fast as we could to the fort, give the structure a solid punch, ride back on my golem, and repeat the process as many times as it took.

Still, I wasn't sure how effective that would be.

After talking with Alan, I headed back to my room. I then dove into bed and asked Master Horace, who was sitting next to my pillow, “Have you ever fought in a war, Master Horace?”

“Sure, back when I was a young whippersnapper. Heheh.” He must’ve been nostalgic for days gone by.

If he was young back then, I guess it was about forty years ago?

“I was living in Salekhard at the time. There was a civil war raging, and my mentor and I didn’t want to see our home laid to waste, so we lent a hand here and there. Mmheehee!”

“What kind of things did you do?”

“Throwing arrows off-course with gusts of wind was pretty standard. What with my mentor being a fire-user and all, there was one time I fanned those flames and burned down an entire mountain full of enemies! Eheehee! Pretty sure the mountain’s been bare ever since, though I have to wonder what it’s looking like these days.”

“You didn’t stay in Salekhard?”

“Well, I’m no spring chicken, and Salekhard is a cold place. I heard the south was kinder on the lower back, so I packed up and moved thataway.”

After that, Master Horace ended up wandering around Farzia. When he was trying to earn some pocket change, he was tricked by Lord Patriciél and forced to swallow a sliver of a contract stone controlled by Lord Credias.

Apparently, a spellcaster’s way of fighting was exactly what I had envisioned.

“I figured fire was the element most suited to offense.”

It was a big contrast to my earth magic. Hurling pebbles around could be a little painful at worst. It didn’t instill the same fear fire did.

Granted, I could always make a giant golem and threaten people with a trampling to scare them off. But flames were daunting even in small quantities, so rather than sustaining and moving around something so big, they got more bang for their buck. I was green with envy.

“If I want to sustain my magic for longer, maybe I should try using a medium.”

I’d been gifted some copper ore by Lord Évrard, so I had a sizable stash. I wondered how long I could extend my time limit if I made use of that.

“It’d have *some* effect, sure. ’Course, it depends on the size of whatever you make. If you make the whole thing out of copper, you’ll be able to control it twice as long. Eeeheehee.”

“And how exactly am I supposed to manage that without owning a copper mine?”

Disappointed, I went to sleep.



Two mornings later, we split our army of 15,000 in two and set off separately. We were heading north-northwest, toward Fort Clonfert in the province of Cassia.

The fort was located along the high road that extended all the way from Évrard to the royal capital, although it branched off in a few places. In short, whether Farzia was making an expedition from the royal capital to Llewynne, or whether Llewynne was marching on the royal capital, taking the high road would be the easiest path.

That was exactly why the fort had been built, with soldiers always garrisoned there in case something happened. So much for that.

Évrard had sent Cassia word of Llewynne's invasion, but in the face of their defective spellcasters and overwhelming numbers, the territory of Cassia had been surrendered nonetheless.

It made it clear how fortunate Évrard was to have withstood their attack.

The main Llewynian troops were moving pretty far west, so Alan and the other commanders predicted that there were at most 10,000 men currently occupying the fort. Unfortunately, so long as they remained barricaded inside, the battle was bound to drag on for a long time, even if we had twice the firepower.

That was where we had gotten the idea to split our forces in two. One half would lead the charge, and the other half would follow after some delay. That way, even if a Llewynian scout spotted us, we could buy some time before they learned our true numbers.

Alan and I were part of the advance party. It would take us five days to come within the vicinity of the fort, and on the sixth day, we were to begin our assault.

It happened on the fourth day of our march.

During one of our breaks, I used some of my copper ore to make a golem. Of course, I didn't want to scare any of the soldiers on their break, so I made sure to do it a short distance from where we'd set up camp.

"Wow, what a nice view!"

This time, I made a boarding dock on the golem's left shoulder. After getting on, I looked out over my surroundings.

"Forget that. How's your magic holding up, kid?"

"Oh, right."

At Master Horace's prompting, I took note of how much mana I was allocating to my golem. *Yeah, this feels easier than usual.*

The copper ore I'd used for the core was amplifying my power, so it felt like the gears of my magic were turning smoothly.

"Better than usual. I think I'll be able to keep this golem going for

a—”

Mid-sentence, I suddenly noticed a group of people in the distance. They were on a narrow path near the foot of a mountain off the side of the high road.

Due to the trees blocking the view, they weren't visible from our resting spot. It was off the high road, too, so it was possible even the scouts we'd sent to check the path ahead hadn't seen them yet.

When I squinted, I saw a carriage packed with people, flanked by men on horseback, and another group of people in pursuit. Yet another group was running up from the high road, perhaps rushing over to join the chase.

“Look, Master Horace! I think those people are being chased!”

“What's this now? Cassian refugees? Seems like a waste of time to chase down ordinary civilians, though. You think those could be bandits cashing in on all the chaos?”

Master Horace's words jogged my memory.

Isn't this a scene from the game?

Said scene, however, was supposed to happen *after* the battle at Fort Clonfert—or so I thought. Could this be a modified version of the fight along the Tyrone River to protect the escaping townspeople from bandits? I was curious about the other group that was potentially trying to save them, too.

I shouted down to Cain, who was keeping an eye on me from the ground, “Some people are being chased up ahead! I'm going to go rescue them!”

Additionally, I told Cain the exact location. He passed it along to the other knight-guards of Alan's who were with us, then began following after me on his horse.

That said, I took a route that completely ignored the beaten path, simply cutting through all the trees in my way. Unsurprisingly, Cain chose to follow me along the high road instead, so he was lagging a short distance behind.

My golem charged forward, sending reverberations through the earth with each mighty step it took and alerting the people fleeing in the carriage to my approach.

Both the fugitives and the pursuers kept glancing over in my direction. The ones in the carriage, who had the bearing of regular townspeople, were gaping most of all.

Once I was close enough to tell, the pursuers didn't appear to be bandits at all. Their black capes *had* made me wonder if they could be Llewynian soldiers, and that hunch turned out to be right on the money.

The tawny capes worn by the men guarding the carriage on horseback weren't associated with any army, so they were most likely

companions of the people on board.

Furthermore, the knights dashing up from the high road were wearing blue capes, which meant they were affiliated with Farzia. Cassian soldiers, perhaps? We weren't too far from the border with Évrard, though. What were they doing all the way out here?

Whatever the case, thanks to their efforts, the carriage riders were likely to be rescued faster than I could get to them. Still, I was hung up on the differences from the game version. It could spell trouble if this had an impact on events down the line, so I wanted more information.

Running forward on my golem, I desperately braced myself against the tremors, much worse than anything I'd experienced during my carriage rides.

Then again, I was starting to get used to this, too. Or maybe I'd just built muscle from clinging to my golem all the time.

Master Horace shouted from where he was strapped to my waist. "Hey—hrk! Little disciple... guh... just what are you doing? Ggh!"

"This might be the same event that happened in the RPG!"

"Do you... HAVE... to join in?! Blech!"

"I want to see it... for myself... to get an idea of... what's to come!"

While I was explaining, my golem's large strides finally brought us to the scene, leaving a trail of toppled trees in our wake. By the time we got there, the blue-caped Farzian knights were already crossing swords with the Llewynian soldiers.

The numbers were nearly even—twenty enemy soldiers, and twenty-odd Farzians.

Already exhausted, the men guarding the carriage were struggling to put up a fight, but that turned out to be a non-issue. The Llewynians, taken aback by the situation they'd found themselves in, were steadily cut down by the Farzian soldiers.

Blood splattered across the ground as swords slashed in wide arcs.

It was a gruesome scene, but for a brief moment, I was entranced by the startlingly impressive show of swordsmanship. However, the black stains forming along the path as blood soaked into the soil, combined with the corpses littering the ground, reminded me that this was reality.

When I spotted a Llewynian soldier who saw that the odds were against him and was making a run for it, I reached out for him with my golem's hand. The golem found its mark, grabbed hold of the soldier, and lifted him off the ground.

"Eeeeeek!"

I hadn't meant to make the golem's grip especially tight, but the Llewynian soldier screamed all the same. Immediately after, his body went limp, head lolling to the side.

“Oh no! Did I kill him?!”



Please no! I thought as I laid the man on top of the golem's left hand. *Oh, his chest is rising and falling. He's breathing!*

Apparently, he had only fainted. Relieved, I moved the golem's right hand over its left, forming a lid to keep him sealed inside.

By that point, the battle was already over.

"Lady Kiara!" someone called out. When I looked down, I saw it was Groul.

"What...? Sir Groul, what are you doing here?!"

If a member of Reggie's royal guard was here, did that mean the people I had pinned as Farzian soldiers were all Reggie's knights? And yet I hadn't caught a glimpse of that familiar silver hair.

"Where's Reggie?"

I felt my stomach go cold. Had he not healed yet? Had his recovery period been prolonged?

But if that were the case, there would be no reason for Groul and the other knights to be here. As I was puzzling it out, another one of the cavalry came to Groul's side.

"Did you come all the way out here by yourself, Kiara? Bad girl. You're in for a lecture later."

"Huh?"

The one who threw back his hood was a man with long, golden hair, half of it tied back into a ponytail. However, those blue eyes of his undoubtedly belonged to Reggie.

"Reggie?"

"Yes, it's me."

He smiled back at me. The golden hair was such a good look on him, it was enough to make me wonder if it had always been that way.

Honestly, though, I think he could pull off just about anything.

"You dyed your hair?!"

"After considering all my options, yes. More importantly, if you intend to take him prisoner, could you lower that man to the ground? We'll go ahead and tie him up."

I followed Reggie's instructions. I couldn't keep my golem out forever, so if they would take care of arresting him, I was better off leaving it to them.

Under Groul's orders, a few knights bound up the unconscious Llewynian soldier.

The other knights had begun talking to the group who had been escaping in the carriage. Both the rescued citizens and the knights who had been protecting them expressed their gratitude over and over. I was relieved to see they were all unharmed.

Then Reggie called me over. "Come here, Kiara."

“Coming!”

After lowering myself back to the ground, I moved my golem to the side of the road and dismantled it, leaving a large pile of dirt behind.

Oh, right. Is there any of my copper ore left? Whenever I use it as a medium, it turns to black charcoal... but maybe I can still salvage some of it.

I considered digging it out so it wouldn't go to waste, but someone suddenly took me by the hand.

“Oh!”

“Is something the matter?”

The owner of the hand was Reggie.

“I made my golem using copper ore as the medium, but I don't think I used the whole thing up. I was going to check if anything was left of it.”

“But you already consumed part of it, no? Then you'd be better off using a new one. If you need extra, I'll make arrangements to supply you with whatever you need.”

Spoken like a true prince. He offered to buy me more like it was nothing.

Well, maybe he wasn't the weird one here. Considering I'd lived as a member of the aristocracy before, my knee-jerk reaction not to let anything go to waste might have had more to do with my past-life sensibilities.

“Oh, alright then. That might be for the best. Erm...”

Embarrassed, I tried to pull my hand away, but Reggie joined our hands more firmly.

Hey... Reggie? Us holding hands out here is worse than embarrassing. It's definitely not appropriate behavior for the prince and the spellcaster!

Just as I was about to make attempt number two to slip my fingers out of his grasp, Reggie stole away my opportunity by tugging me by the hand.

“For now, let's go ask whom it was we just saved.”

Well, yes, I *did* want to know that. Still, walking over to them hand-in-hand was a little too much to bear. And Reggie *still* wouldn't let go. He was like a dog owner worried that I'd run away if he took me off my leash.

“Did you find out what's going on, Groul?”

“Yes, Your Grace. They fled from the castle town of Cassia... and among them is a member of the baron's family.”

“A survivor of the House of Cassia, hm?”

That explained a lot. No wonder they had knights guarding the carriage.

Then, a knight standing beside Groul opened his mouth to speak.

The man looked to be in his forties. He was taller and broader than Groul, and there wasn't a strand of hair to be found on his well-tanned head.

That's right—he was even balder than Master Horace before his transformation. The intimidating aura he gave off was only enhanced by the suit he was wearing.

“We offer you our most humble thanks for coming to our rescue, Your Grace. I am Aubrey, a knight in service to Lord Cassia.”

As he bent down on one knee, sunlight gleamed off the smooth surface of his head.

“To save the people of my country is my natural duty. So, who is this relative of the baron's?”

“Right. You there, bring him over.”

At the order, one of the knights—unsteady on his feet as he was—helped a child out of the carriage.

Dressed in a beige shirt and a black vest and trousers, the boy looked like the son of a reasonably wealthy merchant. He couldn't have been older than ten.

“This is Lord Charles, son of the baron of Cassia.”

Prompted by the man beside him, Charles timidly bowed before Reggie.

I began to fret over this new turn of events. In the RPG, the baron's child wasn't among the rescued townspeople. All you got for defeating the bandits was more information on what the Llewynians were doing.

Right then, Cain finally caught up to us.

“What's going on, Miss Kiara? And I didn't realize you were here as well, Your Grace.”

I didn't know what was going on myself, so I wasn't sure how to answer his question. While I struggled to respond, Felix began to explain the situation from beside Groul.

Meanwhile, from where he stood next to Charles, Aubrey started to tell his side of the story.

“It is truly a heart-wrenching tale.” That was apparently no exaggeration, seeing as tears were already forming in his eyes. “Over twenty thousand Llewynian soldiers stormed the castle. Thankfully, the residents of the castle town had been evacuated after the fort was taken. We helped the baron's son flee along with them, just in case.”

Even though they'd left the castle one step ahead of the enemy, Aubrey and his companions hadn't quite managed to escape to a neighboring territory. On top of the Llewynians, there was the Salekhardian army to deal with, so all the paths to the royal capital were blocked.

Left with little choice, the knights and the refugees had moved

around from town to town, hiding and biding their time, all to keep Charles hidden from the enemy.

“While we were on the run, I heard that the baron’s severed head was paraded around, and his eldest daughter, Lady Flora, was taken prisoner. I’m afraid Lord Charles is the only remaining survivor of the House of Cassia.”

Having lost the lord he served, Aubrey focused his efforts on getting Charles to a safe place. He was headed to Évrard, which he’d heard was taking up arms against Llewynne. Along the way, they were discovered by Llewynian soldiers searching for the baron’s son.

I was glad we had arrived in time to save them... but this really wasn’t anything like the plot of the game.

The House of Cassia was never touched on in the RPG. The only explanation the players got was that Cassia had been occupied, and only Llewynian soldiers remained there. In other words, every last person in the castle had been killed.

But this time around, Charles had survived. Perhaps it was thanks to the message Évrard had sent to Cassia.

I mean, it was definitely a good thing that more people were alive... but when I thought about it *that* way, it meant that sending out advance notice still hadn’t been enough to stop the fort from being captured, and saving a single boy from the baron’s family was the absolute most we could manage.

Maybe we really were stuck on hard mode.

I hadn’t expected Llewynne to send out so many defective spellcasters, either, just like I hadn’t expected them to ally with Salekhard.

It would have been a big help if *we* could ally with another country, but the king had yet to make any attempt to do so. Apparently he had issued a call to arms for the area between the royal domain and Sestina, but he hadn’t taken any action beyond that.

According to Lady Évrard, even if Reggie tried to handle the negotiations himself, there was no telling whether other countries would acknowledge him as a representative of Farzia. So long as the king wasn’t confirmed dead, Reggie had no authority to promise territory cessions, which was the biggest draw for a potential ally. Nevertheless, Lord Évrard was attempting to push negotiations forward.

For the time being, everyone decided to head back to the Évrard army’s resting spot, so I put my thoughts on hold.

“Come this way, Miss Kiara,” Cain called out to me.

I glanced over at Reggie, who was still holding my hand. With a small smile, he finally let go.

So why was he holding it in the first place?

When I went over to Cain, he scolded me. "I understand it was an emergency, but in the future, I would prefer you wait for me before you charge in. I need to be there to protect you in case anything happens."

"Sorry."

"As long as you understand. Let's be off."

Cain was about to help me onto his horse, but I asked him to wait.

"Once everyone is gone, there's something I'd like to do."

"What might—Oh. I see."

As soon as Cain followed my gaze, he understood what I was talking about. Excluding the one man I'd captured, the rest of the Llewynian soldiers had been slain.

The more time passed, the stronger the scent of blood hanging in the air. It seemed I was gradually getting used to it; it was certainly unpleasant, but it didn't make me nauseous anymore.

However, the strong odor was bound to attract monsters. If we left the bodies out in the open, they were fated to become a meal for the beasts. Even if it was the result of a fight, I didn't want to leave them to such a miserable fate.

And that was why I wanted to bury them... but I'd seen the hatred in the eyes of the carriage riders as they looked at the corpses. I figured I shouldn't bury the soldiers while they were watching, so I waited for them to leave.

Since Cain and I were just standing around a little ways away from everyone, Reggie guessed what we were up to and urged the carriage and the Cassians to go on ahead.

Once only Reggie and a few other knights were left, I used the miniature hill of dirt to craft a doll twice the size of a person. Using the golem, I moved the bodies to the side of the road, then covered them with dirt. For a finishing touch, I dismantled the golem on top of them, and then I joined Cain on his horse.

When they saw I was finished, Reggie and his knights spurred their horses forward.

As we followed after Reggie's group, Cain asked, brusquely, "Why are you so insistent on burying the enemy?"

I recalled that he'd asked me a similar question a little while ago.

Back then, I'd chalked it up to a manner of hygiene, but that excuse was a little too flimsy this time around. We were far from any residential areas, and only a small number of soldiers had died. He probably didn't understand why we couldn't just let the monsters take care of them.

So this time, I decided to be honest.

"I don't want to grow accustomed to death. Or killing."

"Wouldn't you be better off that way?"

Cain assumed that would be preferable to my constant distress. But I shook my head.

“It’s probably because of my past-life memories. I was raised to believe that you should never resort to murder, even if it’s in self-defense... so all the killing is hard for me to bear. But I know that I have to if I want to protect the people I care about. This is how I decided to come to terms with it.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier for you to let yourself grow accustomed to it, rather than taking each and every death like the passing of a close friend?” The look on Cain’s face told me he didn’t understand.

“Besides, these men have hurt the people you want to protect. Don’t you hate them?”

Lord Évrard had been injured. Lady Évrard had endured a close shave, too. Cain found it bizarre that I didn’t hate the men responsible for that.

Cain had hated the Llewynians ever since they killed his family. It was only natural for the people of this world to feel that way. Most likely, if someone did the same thing to me—even in my past life—I might have hated them enough to kill them without hesitation, too.

After the siege, I tried to pretend that the Llewynians had killed my family. And in practice, some soldiers I was acquainted with *had* been lost in the battle. But that wasn’t enough to change how I felt.

“My past life is in the past. I know it would be easier on me to just live in the present. But if I just tell myself that none of it matters anymore... it would be like saying my memories of my old family, which have kept me going for so long, don’t matter. And that would devastate me.”

I’d never had a real family in this life. Instead, the family from my past life had occupied that place in my heart.

Whenever I closed my eyes, I remembered extending my hand without the slightest trace of fear and another hand reaching back, filled with unconditional love. If I denied the importance of those memories, it would feel like cutting ties with my old family, and I would lose sight of the very ground under my feet.

“I’m sure it’s hard for you to understand... but it really is true that I want to protect everyone. I’m burying these men so that I can fight while mollifying the part of myself ingrained with those past-life beliefs. Mourning the dead feels like some sort of atonement for what I did to them.”

I did my very best to explain myself to Cain, but I wasn’t sure if I’d gotten my point across. I was worried about his reaction, but once I was done talking, Cain looked to be deep in thought.

Then he simply murmured, “I see,” and went quiet.

Maybe it was too much to ask him to understand.

The horses trotted along, coming up on the area where the Évrard army had stopped for a break.

There, Cain finally opened his mouth to speak. "I won't hesitate to protect you. To do that, I will kill without reservation. If I think it will create more trouble down the line, I might even kill someone we could have taken alive. I believe that is my duty as the one tasked with your protection. Knowing that, do you think you'll come to hate me?"

"Not at all," I answered. "I know you're doing it to keep me safe. I've just been held back by my memories. I know the rest of you think differently."

"That's fine, then," Cain responded, letting out a short breath. Perhaps he took that to answer a question of his.

On the other hand, it made me think. I was living in a different world than in my past life. If I never adapted to the philosophies of this world, I would start to feel uneasy about the differences between myself and everyone around me, and those people would find me troubling in return.

Would the day ever come when I would be able to accept it?



Once we arrived back at the break spot, we sent Charles and the carriage crew back to the province of Limerick straight away. As we watched them set off, flanked by soldiers to guard them, bald mister Aubrey bit down on a handkerchief, his eyes watering.

Wait, what are you still doing here?!

"Lady Spellcaster, you have my deepest gratitude for your assistance just now."

"There's no need to thank me. I'm just glad I could help. Um, are you planning to join our campaign?"

"Indeed. The soldiers of Cassia have long since scattered, and His Highness' march will serve to liberate our province. In place of our young Lord Charles, I must be of service to... snff!"

My first impression of him had been that he was a scary-looking man, but it turned out he was easily moved to tears. It made him a lot easier to talk to, that was for sure.

"I've officially joined under your banner. The margrave's son, Lord Alan, has handed me command of one of his troops. I am most pleased to be fighting alongside you, Lady Spellcaster."

Surely I was too young to be more than a little girl in his eyes, but he still regarded me with the utmost politeness. What a kind man.

As far as Reggie went, I finally found out what had brought him here when we all sat down to eat at the campsite.

Reggie left the castle three days after the rest of us had departed.

Taking our schedule into account, he had set his pace so he could join up with us before the assault on Fort Clonfert. On the way, Felix's sharp ears had picked up on distant screams and the whinnies of horses, and that was when they'd spotted the speeding carriage carrying Lord Cassia's son. Based on the number of Llewynians in hot pursuit, Reggie and his knights had assumed there was more to it than met the eye, and rushed to their rescue.

That's when I had shown up.

"I must admit, we were lucky to have you there. Our numbers were nearly even, but once the enemy faltered in the face of your magic, it was easy enough to mow them down."

Did you really just say "mow them down," Your Grace? Sheesh, sometimes you really scare me.

"Why did you dye your hair?"

"Groul and the others were worried that I didn't have enough escorts with me. They requested I dye my hair, if nothing else, to throw the enemy for a loop. Now that we've finally made it, I plan to wash it out. How is anyone supposed to tell I'm Reginald from a distance otherwise?"

From the way he's talking, you'd never guess he'd just been sniped... He really takes his role as our emblem seriously, huh?

"Wisen up, Reggie. You *do* realize we'll be in trouble if our emblem is the first one to fall, yes?" Alan, who was eating with us in Reggie's tent, butted in with a sigh.

Thank you, Alan!

"But wouldn't that be bad for morale if the general stays hidden?"

"Mmheehee! You sure love the spotlight, huh?" Master Horace teased.

"If I don't stand out, I'm failing to fulfill half my role," Reggie countered with a smile. Tugging on a lock of his hair, he went on, "So you see, that's why I'd like to remove the dye as quickly as possible."

"Good grief! Just stay that way until we've taken the fort!" barked Alan.

"I suppose I have no choice," Reggie said, heaving a sigh.

While we were absorbed in conversation, everyone finished up eating.

"I'll go drop off our dishes." I stood up and collected Reggie and Alan's plates and cups.

"No, let me call for my lord-in-waiting. It's not safe for you to wander around by yourself, Kiara."

"It'll be fine! I'll only be gone for a little bit. Besides, Cain is nearby, and ever since I showed off my magic back in Limerick, everyone's been too scared of me to try any funny business."

"Ah, yes... *that*," Alan muttered.

“Did something happen?”

“Kiara held a demonstration so the Limerick and Reinstar soldiers wouldn’t be shocked when they witnessed her magic. In her enthusiasm, she had her golem pull some bizarre maneuver, and part of the wall was destroyed as a result.”

“Eheheh... Hey, at least I fixed it!”

I attempted to laugh it off (and tack on an excuse while I was at it). I didn’t want to dig a deeper hole for myself by blurting out something like, “But wouldn’t it have been so cool if I made my golem do a right straight punch?!”

“Yes, there is that. But don’t forget there were soldiers standing right under the crumbling debris of the wall.”

“Were they hurt?”

“No, Kiara shielded them with her golem. But just think about it! From their point of view, a hand the size of their entire body suddenly descended upon them and lifted them up into the air. Both men passed out. The ones watching started screaming about how the golem was strangling them to death, and the whole scene turned into chaos.”

Once they had seen that the two men had only fainted, things had calmed down, but a healthy fear of me had been instilled in the hearts of everyone watching. The whole point had been to get them *used* to my magic, but they walked away more terrified of me than ever.

After the story was finished, there was a short pause, and then Reggie burst out laughing.

“Haha! Unpredictable as ever, Kiara!”

“Anyway. It turned out fine,” I pouted, and before anyone could say anything more about it, I hurried out of the tent.

Right then, Cain came walking over.

“You should wait for a lord-in-waiting to take care of that, Miss Kiara.”

Even Cain was scolding me. I had nowhere left to run.

He took the tableware off my hands, offering to drop it off himself, leaving me no choice but to return to being the laughingstock of the tent.

When I dejectedly made my way back to Reggie’s tent, I grabbed the tent flap, but my hand stopped where it was when I overheard the conversation going on inside.

“Don’t strain yourself. You’re still in bad shape, aren’t you?”

“You know me too well, Alan.”

“Of course. How many years do you think we’ve known each other? It’s your left shoulder, isn’t it?”

His shoulder was where the arrow had hit him when he’d shielded me. It was unsettling to hear that it was still hurting him. Was it an aftereffect of the contract stone? A regular doctor wouldn’t be able to

tell what the issue was. Why hadn't he said anything about it to me?

"The wound itself has healed up. I can still move—"

Reggie was cut off when I barged into the tent.

"Show me where it hurts, Reggie!"

Reggie stood up, perhaps attempting to make a getaway, but I held him in place.

"It *does* hurt, doesn't it? I heard Alan just now! He said you were in bad shape!"

"I see you were eavesdropping, Kiara. But there's no need for you to worry; it's healed."

"That wasn't a normal injury and you know it! I'm the only one who can take a proper look at it, so off with your clothes!"

I drove Reggie back toward the simple bed behind him, and once he'd staggered into a sitting position, I started peeling off his jacket.

"Wha... *Kiara!*"

"Be a good patient and stay still! Alan, come help me!"

Alan came over at my command, delighted at this development, and held Reggie's arms in place.

Great, now I can strip him nice and easy!

Reggie, meanwhile, was panicking like never before.

"Alan, *she's* the one you ought to be restraining!"

"No, no, this way seems more fun. Besides, she isn't the only one concerned about your injury, and this is the only way you're going to let us take a look at it."

"Listen, you, there's nothing fun about this!" I told Alan sharply. "It's *my* fault he was hurt, you know. Here, could you pull his arm out of this?"

Alan pulled Reggie's arm out of his sleeve, and I finally got the jacket off of him. Next, I went to work unbuttoning his shirt.

"You really shouldn't be doing this, Kiara!"

Reggie tried to stop me, embarrassed, but I had no intention of backing off until I'd checked out his wound.

"It's fine! Just stay still!"

"Yes, you should stay still, Reggie. It's funnier that way."

Alan snickered as he kept Reggie fixed in place. Another voice joined his in laughter, but Master Horace never *stopped* cackling, so it was easy to tune him out. All that mattered was getting the shirt off of him so I would be able to look at his shoulder.

"I wouldn't have thought *this* was your idea of a good time, Alan."

Reggie fixed him with a baleful glare, but Alan just snorted dismissively in return. Reggie didn't argue any further, so he probably wasn't seriously angry. *Whew.*

However, as I exposed his chest and took note of his surprisingly muscular shoulders and collarbone, it finally dawned on me that I

was, perhaps, doing something pretty awful here.

That was when Cain entered the tent.

“Are you... *assaulting* His Highness?”

Cain stopped where he stood in the entrance, staring at us with a vacant expression.

“What? Assaulting him?”

Why would he say that?

That was when it hit me. We were on top of the bed. Alan was pinning Reggie’s arms behind his back, and I was pulling off his shirt. Realizing our current pose couldn’t look like anything *but* me forcing myself on him, I froze.

When he saw my face, Alan released his hold on Reggie and burst into a fit of laughter.

“Ahahahahaha! This is too much!”

“See, Kiara? I told you not to do it.” Reggie heaved a sigh. He took one look at my stiff face, then with a dry laugh, he muttered, “You’re hopeless,” and wrapped his newly freed arms around me.

“What? Hey!”

Why are you holding me in place? Hold on a second, I can feel Reggie’s bare skin against my cheek! And it’s so smooth! God, this is embarrassing! I tried to escape his grasp, but Reggie wouldn’t let me go.

“You embarrassed me, so now I get to embarrass you. You can still perform your checkup like this, can’t you?”

Yes, I can! But that’s not the issue here! I don’t need to snuggle up this close to get a good look at the wound! Hang on, isn’t this pose even more inappropriate than when I was undressing him? I mean, it’s a half-naked man holding me against his chest... Look, Alan is totally put off!

“Now you’re taking it too far,” Alan griped.

“You have no one but yourselves to blame. I told you to stop, didn’t I, Kiara?”

Reggie flashed a beautiful, captivating smile right near my face, and my brain short-circuited.

Then, someone grabbed my arm and pulled me away from Reggie.

“That’s quite enough of this nonsense, Your Grace,” Cain chided as he grabbed my shoulder, looking as deadpan and stony-faced as ever.

Reggie just laughed. “Well, I wouldn’t want to make Cain angry. That’s enough messing around for now, I suppose. This was about my wound, wasn’t it? If taking a look will give you peace of mind, here.”

Reggie slipped out of his left sleeve and showed me his back.

Grr... How does he manage to be sexier than the average woman? I was overcome with a mysterious sense of defeat, but checking on his injury took precedence here, so I took a step closer.

I hadn't had the chance to take a proper look at it before we left the castle. There were long, vertical streaks of blackened skin where the arrow had hit him. They looked like jagged burn marks.

"Can I touch it?"

"If it's necessary for the spellcaster's examination, then by all means."

It didn't seem to hurt Reggie when I touched it, at least. Next, I felt out his mana. Everything seemed to be under control, but I definitely sensed a foreign presence in there.

"Mm... It's about the same as before. Does it hurt?"

"Only as much as any old wound."

Reggie smiled and put his shirt back on, as if that was all he had to say about that. There was nothing more I could do, in any case, so I didn't probe further.

If we could just cut out the blackened part of his skin, the source of Reggie's pain would be gone. All the power of the contract stone was concentrated there. Unfortunately, it was impossible to perform that kind of surgery with the medical technology of this world.

I barely possessed any medical knowledge myself, but even I knew that it wouldn't be possible to pull off a procedure like that without blood transfusions or antiseptics, neither of which we had here. Perhaps if someone invented a surgery using that wonderful salve, we could manage something close to it. Or maybe it was just impossible without antibiotics.

Either way, if it still hurt, I wished Reggie would just rest until he recovered more of his strength. But of course, he had every intention of rushing out onto the battlefield as our emblem.

How was I supposed to stop him? He had forbidden me from doing anything to help.

Lost in my worries, I left the tent so Reggie could get some sleep.

If I had no way to stop him, the best I could do was make it so Reggie didn't have to fight. In other words, I had to turn the tide of the battle overwhelmingly in our favor using my magic.

If I used enough copper ore, I could extend the time limit for my golem.

What I *really* wanted to do was to control it remotely. It would be ideal if it could move totally independent of me, like Master Horace, but my skills weren't quite there yet. If only I could strengthen the influence of my power somehow, so many more options would become available to me.

"Oh!" I suddenly exclaimed.

"Hm?" Alan, who had accompanied me outside, looked back over his shoulder, then made a disgruntled face.

Perhaps the way I was grinning from ear to ear crept him out.

“Teeheehee! Can I ask you about something, Alan?”

Chapter 4: The Battle of Fort Clonfert

“Why me?”

“If I told Reggie, he’d just try to stop me, so I’m getting the permission of his second-in-command.”

“I see...”

That was a good enough explanation for Alan. He covered his face with both hands and hung his head.

Since I couldn’t do anything without Cain’s approval, I brought him into the conversation, too.

When I told them my idea, Alan seemed to think it was worth considering, while Cain expressed his disapproval. However, when I reminded him that it was safer than rushing into open fire, he reluctantly agreed to go along with it.

I couldn’t forget about Groul, either. I needed him and the rest of the royal guard to hold Reggie back.

I had Cain call for him, then told him the specifics of my plan, requesting that he lead Reggie as far away from me as possible during the battle.

Groul looked conflicted. “I have no issue with your proposal, but His Highness will notice you’re planning something. His instincts are terribly sharp.”

“That’s exactly why I need your help. Even if Reggie figures it out, once I’ve already put it into motion, it’ll be too late for him to do anything about it.”

“Quite the strategist, aren’t you?” muttered Groul. After a few seconds’ hesitation, he agreed to my scheme.

The next day, I attended a strategy meeting with Cain. Inside the large tent, one after another, people took their seats at the tables and chairs that had been set up for us.

From Évrard, there was Alan and Chester, who was serving as his head knight-guard in Cain’s place. There was also Dexter, the thirty-or-so-year-old man promoted to cavalry general when the previous commander had remained behind on account of his injuries, and Gale, garrison commander of the margraviate.

Then came Lord Reinstar’s grizzled uncle, Edam. At Edam’s side was his junior and Lord Limerick’s younger brother, Jerome. They each had a knight accompanying them.

The last person to take a seat was Reggie, still a blond, with Groul

by his side.

Before we could begin to talk strategy, I stood up from my seat.

“As our spellcaster, I would like to propose a change in our strategy for retaking Fort Clonfert.”

The first person to respond was Alan, who pretended this was news to him. “What’s most important to us is that you handle that golem of yours. Has something happened that would require us to rethink our strategy? It’s not that you’ve become unable to control it, correct?”

“Quite the opposite. You could say I can provide an even better service now.”

Edam and Jerome’s faces brightened, holding high hopes for the spellcaster’s military contributions.

“Do tell. Considering the long series of battles to come, we would like to prevent the loss of as many soldiers as possible,” Edam said.

I nodded at him. “This should give us an even more advantageous position over the enemy. Their morale will be dampened significantly; we can anticipate a further decrease in their numbers due to desertion.”

“What do you plan to do?” Dexter asked, leaning forward.

“I’ll use my golem to destroy the fort wall as soon as the fighting breaks out.”

“Yes, that’s certainly possible for you,” Jerome said with a nod. He had, after all, stood witness to me destroying part of Limerick’s castle walls.

I am so, so sorry about that. I fixed it, so please forgive me!

“I was under the impression that you couldn’t leave your golem’s side,” Reggie countered. In contrast to his gentle tone, the look in his eyes told me he wouldn’t let me get away with a lie.

I looked him straight in the eyes and answered, “I won’t go anywhere. I’ve learned how to control it from a distance.”

Everyone unanimously agreed that in that case, there were no issues.

Alan got the ball of consensus rolling. Since I wouldn’t be charging directly onto the battlefield, Reggie couldn’t come up with an argument against my proposal. He clearly thought it was strange that I’d suddenly acquired a new skill, but I dodged the issue by saying it was something I’d achieved after learning various methods from Master Horace.

With that, we successfully devised a plan to capture the fort, factoring in the chaos caused by my golem’s charge and the destruction of the fort wall.

Once the strategy had been decided, we had the two halves of our troops meet up again. We moved north, then eventually started

marching west along the high road. There was no longer any need to camouflage our true numbers.

During our morning break, I took Cain and moved to an area a short distance away to perform another experiment.

There, I had a golem slightly larger than Master Horace scurry around. As I looked on, the corners of my mouth quirked up.

So cute!

“Mmheehee! Looks like you’re getting the hang of it, kid.”

“Yeah, it’s going really well. Why didn’t I just do this from the start?”

Drawing a blank on something always made it feel as though there were a wall blocking you from reaching the right answer. Once you actually thought of it, you’d wonder why you’d never thought of it before, when the solution was right in front of you all along.

Cain spoke bitterly, in stark contrast to my delight. “To be perfectly honest, I’m not happy about this. I’m sure anyone who saw what happened to you that time will be horrified.”

“But if I’d done this from the beginning, everyone would have assumed this is just how magic works. Don’t you think so? People are plenty likely to get hurt if they fight with a sword, but nobody stops them, because that’s just how war is.”

The knight furrowed his brow. “Why is it that you become so articulate in moments like these? I’m almost of the mind to conspire with His Highness and keep you locked away until the war is over.”

With a sigh, Cain walked over and lifted my hand by the wrist.

What?! Is he planning to make good on that threat NOW? I panicked, but he didn’t do anything more than that.

“I suppose it’s preferable to dashing through enemy territory in small numbers.”

“Exactly. Oh, but Sir Cain? Even with this strategy, I’ll probably find myself standing in the middle of the battlefield again. I’m sorry I always cause you so much trouble, but I’ll be counting on you to keep me safe.”

I grasped the hand of his that was holding my wrist and made a wish.

I couldn’t let myself become someone for Reggie to protect. I couldn’t let myself rely on him too much. If I wanted to stand by his side as an equal, I had to learn to take care of myself. The reason he wouldn’t let me protect him was because he wasn’t convinced I could fight by his side. He thought of me as weak, so he prioritized keeping me safe above all else.

Unfortunately, my physical ability was, in fact, worse than garbage. Unless I had someone to physically defend me, I was bound to be shot by an oncoming arrow or slain by a charging soldier while I

was busy casting my magic. That was why I needed Cain's help.

Cain stared down at me. "Do you remember when you fought with Lord Alan back at Évrard Castle?"

"Uh? Yes...?"

He was talking about the time Alan had refused to believe my reincarnation story.

"It was when I saw you pressing on in the face of every hardship that I decided to help you. I'd forgotten that for a while, I think. You look so small and weak that it's easy to lose sight of your strength."

Having him look me in the eyes and tell me that was so embarrassing that I had to stare at the ground. My face had to be bright red. Cain's confession of respect for me was flustering like nothing else.

When I glanced back up, I saw a smile on his face, shadowed by the sun's glare behind his head. For a brief moment, something about that expression of his looked strangely bleak, until I blinked it away.

"But the fact is, you *are* weak. There are limits to what I can do to protect you. Nothing ever goes perfectly. There's always a chance I could slip up and get you killed. And considering you don't even know how to swing a sword, I would prefer to keep you off the battlefield as much as possible—particularly when it's liable to turn into a bloody battle. However," Cain went on, "His Lordship has ordered me both to protect and obey you. If you command it, I cannot stand in the way of what you wish to do. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

In other words, he was telling me to make it an order. Cain didn't want to abide by my decisions, but if it was my command, he had no choice but to obey.

That idea didn't sit well with me at all. I'd never ordered anyone to do anything before. In my past life, I had been raised not to boss people around, and those values had stuck with me.

"Think about your priorities, kid," Master Horace egged me on with a cackle. He took my lack of response to mean that I was torn.

He has a point, I thought. If there was something I wanted badly enough to order Cain around for it, then perhaps I had no choice but to bend him to my will.

Still, I wanted to get him to *agree* to help me if I could. As I wondered to myself if that would be such a difficult task, I peeked up at Cain's face.

"I won't be persuaded."

He turned me down before I could even say anything. *That's harsh, Sir Cain.*

"And we don't have time for that, either way."

"Ugh..."

I was at a loss for words. Cain had outplayed me. The man had

years of life experience on me; I was no match for him. Plus, I assumed having siblings had made him good at getting people to listen.

I wasn't willing to give in, however. In the coming battle, I was going to protect everyone to the best of my ability.

"I command thee to protect me." I groaned as I gave the order, and what left my mouth came out sounding really bizarre and stilted. Still, it *did* have the word "command" in there, so Cain gave me passing marks nonetheless.

"Very well. Until the battle is over, I will assist you in getting wherever it is you want to go."

So... that's his way of saying he'll help me out this time, I think.

There was no telling about next time, though.



After joining up with the troops lagging behind, the Évrard army arrived near Fort Clonfert around midday. According to a scout's report, the enemy had begun forming their lines of battle in preparation for our assault. The Llewynians must have left scouts of their own along the high road.

Our scouts really were impressive to infiltrate enemy territory in such small numbers and come back alive. The role called for stealth over swordsmanship. The moment you were discovered, it was all over, so I couldn't imagine how much courage it took.

In accordance with the report, the Évrard troops marched up to Fort Clonfert in one long stretch.

We stopped just before reaching the spot where their archers would be able to trap us in a pincer attack. A separate group was already on the move to take care of the bowmen.

I was at the head of the troops with Cain, surrounded by ten other cavalymen led by the Cassian knight Aubrey.

The Llewynian men were a few hundred paces in the distance. When I saw the archers and foot soldiers lined up waiting for us, I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach. With all the soldiers' eyes on me, my legs started to shake.

But this wasn't the time or place to lose my nerve.

I got down from Cain's horse, took out the copper ore I'd kept in the pocket of my jacket, and placed as much of it as I could hold on the ground. Next, I stealthily removed my knife from its sheath and made a shallow cut on the back of my hand.

I swallowed my cry of pain. I'd used the back of my hand because I wasn't sure I'd draw enough blood if I just carefully sliced a fingertip, but it was a deeper cut than I'd meant to make.

I touched the ore with my bloody, dripping hand.

“Alright, let’s get started.”

Channeling my power through the blood and ore, I perceived the mana in the soil so clearly that I could count the exact number of stones lying before my eyes. I molded it all together, and from the earth rose a golem housing my blood-stained ore within.

Due to the nature of the soil in this region, the golem was an off-white color. It was the same size as the one I’d made in front of Évrard Castle.

The chill that ran through my body alerted me as my mana was drained away, but it wasn’t as bad as I’d expected. If anything, after a passing feverish haze, I felt uplifted.

“Oh, this is pretty easy!”

“Don’t get complacent. Even if it *feels* easy, push yourself too hard and you risk running yourself dry before you know it. Eeeheehee! Once your hands are gone, it’ll be too late to start panicking!”

I nodded at Master Horace’s advice.

The Llewynians who saw my golem cried out in distress. The soldiers who had seen my golem before recalled how their commander had been murdered, while the ones who hadn’t were shaken by the sight of the bizarre giant.

I made my golem hold the remainder of the bloodied ore in its hand and ordered it forward.

“Go!”

At my command, the golem began walking step-by-step toward Fort Clonfert. This time around, it was easy to move it, almost like it was an extension of my own body.

As I suspected, using blood made my magic easier to control than ever before. I’d experimented with smaller objects, but I was relieved to have proven my theory with something more sizable.

The idea struck me when I was remembering how Reggie had nearly died. In the heat of the moment, I’d just thought, “Well, the contract stone dissolved into *my* body, too,” and mixed my blood into Reggie’s body to make the process more efficient. But the ease with which I’d guided his mana after that gave me an idea: if I used my blood, perhaps I could control my magic more easily.

My prediction was spot-on. With this, I could control the golem from my side of the battlefield and destroy the fort.

Cain frowned when he saw my wound. It must have reminded him of how I’d drenched my hands in blood and nearly lost my fingers when I was trying to save Reggie. He was probably keeping watch to make sure my fingertips didn’t start disintegrating.

Regardless, he was under my orders, so he didn’t complain.

The Llewynian soldiers screamed and tried to run out of my golem’s path. After all, this wasn’t an opponent they could hurt with

their arrows. Even chipping away at the behemoth with their swords would take a staggering amount of effort.

At the sound of a bugle echoing in the distance, the Évrard army charged forward. Crowds of soldiers rushed ahead, passing me by.

The bugle was the signal that the archers in the forest had been subdued. Just as planned, no arrows came flying out of the woods. Soldiers and horses alike ran straight ahead, with nothing to block their path.

The tremors in the earth shook my feet and hands, still pressed to the ground.

As I remembered that Reggie and Alan were part of the blitz, I was overcome with concern for their safety. However, I couldn't afford to divide my attention.

As my golem walked around, sending the enemy soldiers into chaos, I directed it toward the fort.

The Llewynian soldiers holed up inside the fort were in quite a panic. I could hear alarm bells ringing like crazy all the way from where I stood.

Once my golem had advanced far enough, I took my hands off the ground. Insisting that he take care of my cut, Cain picked me up and climbed back onto his horse. I was impressed by his strength.

He took the medicine I'd been keeping in my pocket, applied it to some cotton gauze wrapped in oil paper, and dabbed at my cut.

"Ouch, that stings!"

It was a different flavor of pain than when I'd cut it. Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes.

"Of course it does. Now hurry up and wrap it in a bandage." He paused. "And don't tell me you carved out the back of your hand this time."

"N-No, it's fine."

Hurrying me along, Cain drew his sword from its sheath, standing alert. After rushing to wrap my hand in bandages, I turned my attention to the battlefield enveloped in the scent of blood and iron.

Having judged that it was too dangerous to stay inside, soldiers were flooding out of the opened gates of Fort Clonfert.

Before this, their plan might have been to take down our forces with the first batch of soldiers they threw out, then hole up inside the fort if things weren't looking good for them. But now, someone who could destroy the fort itself had come within striking range. They were probably running for fear of being crushed.

Of course, I couldn't sit around and wait for them all to escape. My golem thrust a hand forward, and with a sound similar to an explosion, a hole opened up in the wall of the fort.

Seeing that their escape route had been destroyed, the Llewynian

soldiers already out on the battlefield started to panic, only to steadily find themselves pierced through by Évrard's swords and spears.

Voices calling for the Llewynian's surrender rang out across the battlefield.

"You can't run back inside your fort anymore! Surrender and we shall spare your lives!"

"Drop your weapons and put your hands up!"

However, the Llewynian soldiers refused to give up their struggle. At the orders of their commander, they consolidated their forces and continued to fight.

Then, a knight sprang forward to take down the enemy commander.

Is that Alan?

As they watched him knock away the soldiers in his path on his horse, the Llewynian soldiers trembled in fear.

Elsewhere, another group of knights galloped by, led by a man whose golden hair fluttered in the wind. Soon, the Llewynians were screaming and dropping their weapons as Évrard soldiers swarmed them like ants attracted to sugar.

The brunt of the battle had moved toward Fort Clonfert, so I asked Cain to get us a little closer. The closer we got, the more Llewynian soldiers I saw standing around with their arms in the air, being apprehended.

"CURSE YOU, wretched spellcaster!"

Meanwhile, a few knights and soldiers rushed forward from a distance, full speed ahead, in hopes that killing me could somehow turn things around for them.

Some were run through by the spears of Aubrey's men, while others were slashed away with Cain's sword.

Unlike the battle at Évrard Castle, I couldn't afford to avert my gaze. If I wasn't looking at my golem, I'd lose control of it. Still, my vision blurred every now and then, and I had to reach up to wipe my eyes. I wished I could make myself stop; surely people were going to think me strange for crying when I was the one winning.

"Let's stop here, Miss Kiara. This should be close enough," suggested Cain, but we were still a little too far.

"Could you take us just a little bit farther? We left them an escape route, but the people inside the fort might assume they have no way forward and resort to scorched-earth tactics. A hopeless fight is just exhausting for both parties, isn't it?"

That was exactly why we'd decided not to chase down any soldiers fleeing from the fort during our strategy meeting. However, people could end up freezing in place when overcome with fear.

As soon as the petrified soldiers saw a human, they came running

and frantically swinging their swords at the less frightening target.

It was clear that the enemy was holding out for longer than we'd accounted for. Thus, I had to do something drastic enough to crush their will to fight. For that, I needed to get close to the fort.

With a thunderous roar, my golem was making a new entrance in the outer wall of the fort.

However, all the blows from arrows and swords were beginning to chip away at its body. I wouldn't be able to keep it going for too much longer. Thus, I had the golem place the copper ore in its hands on top of the outer wall a short distance away.

"Time to finish this."

I hopped down from Cain's horse and placed my hands on the ground one last time.

First, I dismantled my golem. The Llewynian soldiers standing nearby were completely buried. Next, I sought out the presence of the copper ore on top of the wall. It had my blood on it, after all, so I managed to track it down. I was lucky, though; if the fort had been made of wood, I might not have been able to pick up on it at all.

Then, I poured forth my mana.

Tremors gradually began to run through the top of the wall.

In the next moment, the stone turned to sand and collapsed like an avalanche. A large section of the wall melted away, and screams rang out all around it.

After that, no one would opt to stay inside the fort. Those who had kept on fighting, forgetting that retreat was an option, would realize that they had no choice but to run. At the sight of the supernatural phenomenon, a great deal of Llewynian soldiers had surely lost their will to fight.

I stood up and stared out at the fort, a large stretch of its wall completely gone.

The Évrard soldiers raised yet another battle cry. The fight was as good as won.

"How are you feeling, Miss Kiara?" Cain dismounted from his horse and grabbed hold of my arm.

"Oh, um..." He was probably worried because I passed out so frequently after using my magic. But this time, I wasn't feeling all that tired. "I'm just fine."

"Does your hand hurt?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. A bit more than I expected."

Hmm. Cain's expression was sterner than I'd ever seen it. He never moved his facial muscles much, so the candid look on his face really stood out.

"Erm... Are you angry?"

"You went much closer to the fort than we'd discussed. But things

are about to end, so there's no point in falling back now."

The battle had entered the wrap-up stages. Around us, Évrard soldiers were rushing to help their injured comrades up and begin tending to their wounds. All the captured Llewynians were gathered in one place, and some of our men had started sorting out what to do in the aftermath.

"I obeyed you regardless because you ordered me to do so, and because I knew you would never give up on something once you've set your mind to it. If I'd tried to stop you, you would have shaken me off and headed to the front lines on your golem, wouldn't you?"

There was a trace of exasperation in his tone. I tried to laugh it off.

"Isn't it better to minimize our losses? Look how many people we saved!"

"Is that right? Then let me ask you this. If you knew that everyone else could be saved with your sacrifice alone, would you roll over and die?" Cain asked, his expression as stoic as ever.

Put on the spot, I was taken aback. "Oh... Um, not for strangers, I don't think..."

There was no way I could sacrifice myself for total strangers. But if Cain, Reggie, or someone equally important were one of those people, I'd probably go through with it after giving it some long and hard thought.

Right then, I had a sudden revelation.

What? Does that mean I'm not actually afraid to die? But I ran away from home all because I didn't want to be killed! Back then, I didn't want to die a villain... So does that mean it's fine as long as I'm a good guy? No, that's not it. I am afraid of dying. Maybe not as much as I used to be, though.

I thought back to when I'd saved Reggie, and how I hadn't been afraid for my own life. Death felt like a faraway concept, somehow. I didn't *want* to get hurt, but I wasn't scared to, either.

How strange. Maybe I was getting so used to war that I'd grown numb to it. I'd never thought of myself as a self-sacrificing person, though.

Someone approached us and said, in a voice laced with annoyance, "Kiara won't give in to intimidation tactics, Wentworth."

It was Reggie.

There was no longer any need for the prince to lead the charge, so he'd retired from the fray. However, as evidence of his sprint across the battlefield, a few bloodstains dotted his uniform.

"I was concerned that the capture of the fort could drag on too long, so I allowed you to do as you pleased... but how could I have guessed that even out of harm's way, you'd find a way to injure

yourself?"

Reggie stared long and hard at my left hand. *Crap... He's scaring me again.* I reflexively hid it behind my back.

"Show me your hand, Kiara."

I silently held out my right hand.

"I clearly meant the *other* one."

Reggie made a sudden grab for my left hand. After examining the bandaged area, he touched my regrown fingernails and fingertips one by one, tracing the pads of my fingers.

Hey, that tickles!

I tried to take my hand back, but Reggie gripped it more firmly, denying me my escape. What an inventive new form of torture.

"Good. Nothing's missing."

Apparently he'd wanted to check that my fingers were okay, but he could've let go a little sooner.

Ignoring my gripes, Reggie spoke to Cain. "I have an idea. Since you're by Kiara's side all the time, I could use your help with it."

After some thought, Cain responded, "Tell me more. Later."

This meant Reggie might have Cain on board for his next plan.

Crap... What do they have in store for me? I'm scared.

As I contemplated my escape plan, I sensed somebody's eyes on me. But when I looked behind me, all I saw was the mountain on the other side of the high road.

Must have been my imagination, I thought.



"A child, hm?"

A certain young man watched from a distance, his gray eyes narrowed, as the wind further tousled his overgrown reddish-brown hair. He'd brought his horse to a stop, but the boy by his side rushed him along.

"Your Majesty! Your *Majesty*, that's quite enough playing around! We must leave this place at once!"

"Can't we watch just a little bit longer? I came all this way to get a sneak peek when I heard the spellcaster was here. Besides, I have plenty of outstanding men working under me. I'm sure they can handle the upkeep and cleanup of the territories we've conquered all on their own. It takes only a little bit of bloodshed, after all. I'd prefer to enjoy myself with someone who takes a little more time and effort to kill."

As a chuckle rumbled in the man's throat and the edges of his mouth curled up in a smile, his wolfish countenance took on an even more sinister air.

The boy with him sighed.

Whenever Isaac made that face, it meant he would go to great lengths to toy with his desired opponent. The boy himself had fallen victim to the same fate, so he sympathized deeply with the new target—in other words, the spellcaster who had summoned an earth giant.

“Say, Mikhail. Do you think that earthen giant would topple over if you smashed both of its feet in one strike?”

“How exactly do you plan to accomplish that?”

“You’re my strategist. You figure it out.”

“I am NOT your strategist! I’m a mere lord-in-waiting!”

Mikhail’s protest implied that he wasn’t happy to be on the battlefield in the first place, but his master paid it no heed.

“If I decide something, then that’s how it is. The king’s word is law.”



Chapter 5: Mercenaries in Maynard City

Fort Clonfert had been retaken. I had buried a quarter of the Llewynian soldiers under the earth, and another quarter had been taken down by the Évrard soldiers.

We'd managed to take the Llewynian commander captive this time. According to him, they'd anticipated my ability to be the same as what they'd seen at Évrard, so they'd planned to wait until I reached my limit before launching an all-out attack. For that reason, half of them had stayed inside the fort... but they were all buried under the soil now.

If they'd ignored me and just launched their full-scale attack from the start, our side would have taken far more damage—or so claimed General Edam of the House of Reinstar when he praised my efforts in passing.

At the time, I was covered up in a cloak Reggie had tossed over my head, so Edam asked me if I was hurt anywhere. The only injury I had, of course, was the one I'd given myself.

My head was just fine, but Reggie had taken issue with my puffy, reddened eyes. When he left to go take command of the troops, he'd given me his cloak to hide under.

Moving right along... It was great that we'd recaptured Clonfert and all, but its function as a fort had been severely compromised. Since, you know, I'd gone and destroyed the wall. Until we cleared away all the dead bodies inside the fort, it wasn't a great place to keep our prisoners or take a rest, either.

Thus, I decided to help out with the cleanup after taking a short break—without using any blood this time. Tidying up and rebuilding the part of the wall I'd destroyed could have taken days upon days with only manpower at our disposal, after all.

Master Horace asked me how tired I was and what condition my mana was in, but I was just a little feverish at worst.

I waited for my fever to go down before joining the restoration and repair work, and when I did, the soldiers welcomed me with open arms.

The problem there was that sand and dirt were very hard to move using a golem. Everything just spilled through the golem's hands.

"You don't *have* to make it in the shape of a human, kid," Master

Horace suggested.

“I know, but that makes it harder to envision it moving,” I fussed.

Since we were cleaning, a giant broom or something would work best. However, lying underneath the soil were the bodies of the many soldiers I’d killed. I didn’t want to expose their dead faces, nor did I want to roughly sweep them around.

If only I could move the dirt like it was traveling along some kind of conveyor belt. But if I tried to move all that soil on my own, I would run out of steam right away.

“Oh!”

Struck with an idea, I created something with four wheels and an arm and a wide shovel attached to the front—or, in modern terms, a bulldozer. Naturally, I built the shovel in just the right shape to slide under the dirt, scoop it up, and carry it around.

“What in god’s name is that?!”

“It’s a very handy, um... *carriage*... that transports dirt around.”

Master Horace gave a hysterical shout at the finished product. Cain’s eyes went wide.

Their reactions were understandable. There weren’t any bulldozers in this world.

It didn’t make the *vroom vroom* of an engine, of course, but the wheels hardened by magic began to spin into motion. My creation scooped up the dirt in front of us, lifted it up so it wouldn’t spill, and carried it to an area just outside the fort.

I’d never driven a car before, so it took me a little while to get the hang of moving it, but the crumbled remains of my golem and the sandy residue of the fort wall were taken away several times faster than human hands could have managed.

I finished up in about an hour, then went to work creating a makeshift wall where I’d left a hole. With it being a stopgap and all, I only had to make it about three mers tall.

I made a large hole in the ground right underneath the pile of dirt and buried it all away. For a finishing touch, I built a hard stone fence around it to make sure no one would step on it... since it *was* a graveyard, after all.

Once my work was done, I exhaled deeply, and Cain took me somewhere I could rest. It was beside a rather large river near the fort. A check was being conducted to make sure there were no enemy soldiers left inside the fort, so I couldn’t go in there yet.

I wondered if the fort had been built here because of the river. Drinking water had to be drawn from the well to be on the safe side, but that alone wouldn’t provide enough water for daily life.

Cain had taken me upstream. There was no one else around, so it was quiet. I washed my hands in the water.

I finally took off Reggie's cloak, which I'd been wearing the whole time. After I folded it up and set it aside, I held my hair back with one hand, knelt by the shore, and plunged my face into the river. The water felt nice and crisp against my eyes, still puffy from crying.

"Wait! Don't drink the water, Miss Kiara!" Cain cried out in a panic.

Uh, don't worry, I know that... Trust me, I know all about hygiene from my past life. I wouldn't drink water straight from a river unless I was really desperate. I'd definitely make myself sick.

"I know, I know. But sometimes, don't you just want to stick your head right into the water?"

I was feeling very refreshed now.

Cain just sighed.

While I was off taking a break, the inspection of the fort had been finished. When Reggie and company returned from routing the enemy, I was ushered inside the fort.

In the main tower of the fort were the living quarters for nobles and military commanders. The stone building was designed with its inhabitants' protection in mind, so the windows were small. Even in the daytime, it was as dim as twilight, and even during the summer, the air was cool. After sunset, it became downright chilly.

I had someone bring me hot water after dinner. I wet a cloth and wiped away all the dust and sweat on my body.

Ahh. Much better.

After I'd returned the water jug to the cooking station, I ran into Reggie, his hair dripping wet.

"Oh, you got rid of the dye," I said.

In the light of the torches lining the corridor, I could see that his hair had returned to its original silver color.

"Who knows when I'll get my next chance. I had to do it while I could."

He had a point. It was easy today, when we were staying in the fort, but we had to assume there would be Llewynian soldiers in the towns we were marching toward. If we stopped for an actual visit, it would have to be after a battle, and if fighting did break out, we'd be too busy fixing up the place afterward to relax.

If I really tried, I could always have a bath prepared while we were camping. But there was always a chance the enemy could attack while our guard was down, so there wouldn't be enough time to wash out the dye with hot water. It would take more than just splashing some water on it to get rid of the dye, so if he hadn't done it now, Reggie might've stayed a blond all the way to Cassia Castle.

I ended up walking nearly all the way back to our rooms with Reggie, who was wiping down his hair. Suddenly, I heard the patter of

footsteps catching up to us from behind. The one who came running up to us, panting, was Reggie's brunette lord-in-waiting, Colin.

"My deepest apologies, Your Grace! If you could just wait a moment, I can take care of your hair—"

"Oh, there's no need for you to worry. You have more important things to do than look after me. Besides, this is your first time on the march. Things never go quite as smoothly on unfamiliar ground."

Reggie's reassurance brought tears to the boy's eyes. This was his first time traveling with an army, and under the circumstances, he was running a little behind schedule in tending to Reggie's needs.

"Still! Please, allow me to do this, at the very least..."

Colin was holding a bundle of warm, dry towels. He really seemed to be having a rough time, so I turned to Reggie and said, "Do you want me to take care of it for you? It's hard to dry your hair on your own."

I was all too familiar with the struggles of having long hair. Reggie's hair was shorter than mine, which reached all the way to my waist, but no doubt it still took a long time to dry.

"What? Oh no, Lady Kiara, I couldn't ask that—"

Colin began to protest, but Reggie cut him off, plucking the towels out of his hands.

"I'll have Kiara help me. I just had you change my water, so you ought to go rest. You haven't received the same training the rest of us have, so you must be tired. Go get ready for tomorrow."

"Erm..."

Reggie walked away, leaving the surprised Colin behind with a "Good night" and pulling me along by the hand.

Uh... I would've come along if you'd asked. Did you really need to grab my hand?

I wasn't sure what was going on, but I wanted Colin to rest easy, so I waved goodbye with a smile. He seemed somewhat apologetic, but he bobbed his head in a bow, a slightly embarrassed look on his face.

When we made it to Reggie's room, the sandy-haired Felix was standing outside. He was looking at us with a grin. Was it because of the hand-holding? Yeah, that had to be it. Still, I was pretty sure it would be rude to shake off the prince's hand with someone else watching.

Felix opened the door, and Reggie and I went inside. Then, for whatever reason, he closed the door behind us instead of following us inside.

Is this... really okay?

I mean, true, Reggie had gone inside my room and shut the door behind him pretty recently. Was this just how everyone around Reggie

had decided to handle me now?

Whatever. I would just be doing an attendant's work today, so I decided not to say anything about it.

Perhaps the room had been used by the baron and other nobles; simple as it was, there was a full sofa set inside.

For now, Reggie's hair was the important thing. It was hot this time of year, sure, but if we left his hair like that for too long, he could still catch a cold.

"Have a seat."

I sat Reggie down on the sofa, stood behind it, and absorbed the water from Reggie's hair with a dry towel. Thanks to all the heat, it dried pretty quickly. I finished up the back of his hair and moved around to the front.

This part was a little more difficult, however, with Reggie staring at me so intently. Before I could think about what I was doing, I threw a towel over his head a little roughly. But that successfully hid me from his gaze, so I crouched down and kept at my task.

I was trying to finish up quickly, but I couldn't just muss up the prince's hair like I would with a wet dog.

Of course, I couldn't leave the towel on his head forever. When I took it away so I could wipe the sides of his hair, Reggie closed his eyes for me. Relieved, I was able to concentrate on finishing my work.

Just when I was about to finish, something suddenly brushed against my ear.

"Eep!"

Surprised at the ticklish sensation, I tried to jump back, but the same hand that had touched my ear grabbed me by the shoulder and reeled me back in. I lost my balance and collapsed on top of Reggie.

Reggie pulled me all the way in and held me close to his chest.

His cheek, his shoulder, and the arm looped around my back to hold me up were all warm. Although it was summer, the air in the fort was chilly at night, so my own shoulder and arms must have grown cold at some point.

The warmth felt really nice. Perhaps I'd been hugged by Reggie so many times now I'd just gotten used to it; I didn't feel the urge to escape his grasp.

Still, it wasn't proper for us to stay in this position when there was no urgent reason for it. I tried to get up, but Reggie tightened his grip around me, holding me in place.

"Hey, Reggie? Um, sorry about that. You surprised me, so I lost my balance."

I was glad that he'd caught me, but we couldn't stay like this. As I began to fret, for some reason, Reggie patted me lightly on the back.

"You're tired, aren't you?"

“Well... yes?” I answered, puzzled. His touch was purposeful, warm, and soothing. It was almost like he was trying to lull me to sleep.

Before I knew it, I felt the strength seeping from my body—almost like I’d curled up on the futon and was about to fall asleep.

Just when I was about to yawn, Reggie said, “We’ll probably be staying at this fort for a few more days, so you should get in some good rest.”

He then released me from his grasp. To my own bewilderment, I felt almost reluctant to move away, but I knew that clinging to Reggie for too long would only trouble him, so I stood up.

After that, I returned to my room. I was so tired that I just said goodnight to Master Horace where he sat on my desk, then dove straight into bed.



The dream I had that night was both very nostalgic and very distressing.

In it, somebody who had been by my side disappeared.

I searched everywhere for that person, wandering and wandering. I’d feel someone touch my arm, but the moment I turned to see who it was, they would vanish into thin air. It was that vague sort of dream.

When I woke up, I noticed how much hotter it was than yesterday, changed into a sleeveless outfit, and forgot all about it.



Why did I get so sleepy last night?

I had acted strangely, for sure, but so had Reggie. At first, I’d thought he’d just wanted to be around someone he could easily talk to, but then he’d barely said anything. After that, I’d figured that he’d just wanted to give his lord-in-waiting a break, but then he went and hugged me. He’d even acted like my mom or something.

I was just as bad, getting successfully lulled to sleep.

Either way, I didn’t really understand Reggie’s feelings.

I casually glanced out the window.

We were set to stay at the fort for a few days, both to wait for the injured to recover and to give our scouts enough time to poke around the province of Cassia.

The temperature had suddenly skyrocketed, so it was a good thing for our men that we’d paused the march. Their military uniforms stripped away and their sleeves rolled up, soldiers stood guard and cleaned up the battleground in shifts, then cooled off in the river to escape the heat.

Meanwhile, other soldiers had been sent all over on reconnaissance, anywhere from the neighboring towns all the way to Cassia Castle. The job had to be done, but I felt sorry that they had to work in this heat.

A warm breeze came blowing through, reminding me of the summers in my past life. I was briefly overcome by a craving for shaved ice. Unfortunately, earth magic was all I could use, so I couldn't make my dreams a reality.

The inside of my room was cooler, almost like a cave, but it was still plenty hot. I was lounging around in my room, wearing the sleeveless dress Lady Évrard had prepared for me, when I turned to Master Horace.

"I can't use anything but earth magic, right?"

What with his clay body and all, the heat didn't slow Master Horace down. He answered immediately, "Not necessarily."

"Really?!"

"But you need to have the right aptitude, even for that. Besides, the results are barely worth it."

"But I *can* cast it?"

"Typically, the sort of magic spellcasters can cast outside their main element hardly counts as sorcery. For example, someone with a slight aptitude for fire might be able to produce burning coals instead of flint, after ten years of hard work."

"Ten... years?"

"You heard me. Ten years."

It wasn't going to do me any good if it took that long. Besides, if all I'd get in the end was such a measly ability, it wasn't worth the effort.

"I've heard that someone who can fully master two elements only shows up once every two hundred years."

Come to think of it, the spellcaster I'd learned about from the Évrard Castle archives had wielded two elements. Who knew I'd been reading about such an incredible genius?

I gave up on my dream of dabbling in ice and water magic and decided to focus my efforts on mastering earth.

I went outside, determined to finish up my construction work. Earlier, I'd been so exhausted that I'd left the bodies piled up outside the fort proper to deal with later. Now was the time to take care of those.

Over my sleeveless dress, I threw a bolero—once again courtesy of Lady Évrard—over my shoulders to keep them hidden, then went about finishing up my work.

I buried all the dead bodies, enemies and allies alike. Doing away with the blood-soaked earth freshened up the air, too.

Some of the soldiers had initially expressed disdain toward my burying the enemy. However, they were so defeated by the heat and the stench that by the time the burial was done, the prevailing attitude had become, *Sure, why not?*

The heat was oppressive, but at that moment, I was grateful for the sun.

To put it another way, a portion of the soldiers who no longer had to dig holes in the hot weather sang my praises for that alone.

“I’d heard stories from the men of Évrard, but how truly convenient!”

“We won’t be able to do things this way *every* time, but it certainly helped us out.”

“Thank you, Lady Spellcaster!”

I returned their delight with a silent smile. If I got them used to the idea, perhaps by the time summer was over, they would think it was only natural to bury enemy soldiers. If it became a Farzian custom, maybe I wouldn’t have to be the one to bury them each and every time; other people would start doing it of their own accord.

I really hope it happens one day.

Once that was taken care of, I conducted a few experiments in the shade.

With the help of my mysterious and definitely-not-cursed artifact (the bloody copper ore), I had successfully extended my time limit. The next thing to work on was quantity.

I tried making as many tiny golems as I could. I had Master Horace stand around as a reference point and made them all about his height. If the clay figurines were identical, I wouldn’t be able to tell which one was Master Horace, so I just made them miniature versions of the usual jumble of rocks.

“One, two, three... That’s ten of them,” he said.

“I can make a lot of them at this size.”

The cluster of golems all lined up in a row reminded me of something. Something I’d seen in a history textbook in my past life. What was it called again?

“The Terracotta Army?” I muttered aloud.

The sculptures had been buried inside an emperor’s tomb in place of the real soldiers and horses. These tiny little guys were one thing, but the life-size ones had to be a pretty terrifying sight. Once they started marching forward, even these miniature ones got comments of “That’s horrifying!” or “The spellcaster has such strange ideas” from the onlooking soldiers.

Ignoring the bystanders, I moved the golems forward to a rhythm of “one, two, one, two” in my head. A short distance away, I had them pivot and walk back to me.

Hey, this is kind of fun.

“Look, Master Horace! If I have a bunch more of these, they’ll be pretty intimidating, right?”

“They’re plenty off-putting already.”

“But if there’s too few of them, they won’t stick out on the battlefield.”

Excited, I tested the limits of how many I could make at once. As a result, I found that I could control about fifty of them as long as they all performed the same motions.

“I really hope I can use this for something.”

Watching them closely, I decided to test how far I could move them remotely.

The three rows of golems advanced at my orders. Any soldiers who ran across them let out startled yelps. Cain came along, his eyes wide. Alan nearly stepped on one. Through all the havoc, the golems just kept moving forward.

“Nice!”

Eventually, the golems walked right out of my line of sight and vanished.

“Oh, I can keep them going for a pretty long time.”

To my surprise, the golems had gone beyond my field of vision. I commanded them to stop and went to catch up with them. They’d ended up pretty far ahead, and all that was left was their remains after turning back to soil.

A soldier who had been passing by was frozen with terror after witnessing the moment they’d dissolved into dirt.

Sorry about that!



After I spent two days conducting all sorts of experiments, a scout finally returned from a Cassian city close to the fort.

It was Maynard City of the province of Cassia. In the RPG, the city was occupied and looted by mercenaries hired by the Llewynians.

“As Lord Alan just mentioned, Maynard City has been occupied by mercenaries. Llewyn permitted them to plunder the city in lieu of a reward. We believe their forces total about two hundred men, and there are three different groups of mercenaries involved. Since Maynard’s leadership was killed by the Llewynians, the townspeople have no means by which to resist.”

The usual suspects were gathered to hear the report.

There was Reggie, Alan, and the two commanding knights of Évrard. Next came me and a representative of each noble house, plus our respective escorts.

After the Llewynian army’s initial descent on Maynard City, many

houses had been destroyed, and a large number of people had been killed, injured, or forced to flee the city. The ones who hadn't managed to escape had no choice but to give in to the mercenaries' demands, anxiously opening up their stores to be robbed. So far, there had been no bloody murders outside of the initial battle, but surely the citizens were all scared to death.

After looting the city, the mercenaries were staying in manors and inns they'd made into their bases.

Evidently, the Llewynians had instructed the mercenaries to come running if they came under attack by the Farzian army at Fort Clonfert or Cassia Castle. Now that news of Fort Clonfert's recapture had reached them, they were making preparations to head out and meet up with the forces at Cassia Castle.

"If we miss our chance now, the mercenaries in Maynard will join up with the Llewynian forces at Cassia Castle," announced Edam.

Mercenaries were people who sold their combat skills. They could only make a living in a world full of skirmishes. Nobody needed them during peaceful times, so they often had to disband for lack of profit.

Their participation in the war was problematic for one main reason: their level of experience.

The bulk of an army's firepower came from recruits who typically worked in rural villages. Most of them had no battle experience whatsoever. Thus, many of them would flee in fear when it came down to it, and the moment they heard the enemy was driving them back, they would assume the fight was lost and surrender quickly.

However, mercenaries had more fighting experience, so they could better judge the tide of a battle. Plus, they were bound by a financial contract, so they had to make sure their employer won. Sometimes they would even work to raise morale by encouraging the drafted soldiers.

They were extra trouble on the battlefield, too. Some could take on knights in a one-on-one fight and leave over a dozen dead men in their wake.

For the record, I was the one tasked with raising the fighting spirit of the Évrard army.

Évrard was a region that saw war quite frequently, so many of the farmers who enlisted with our army had plentiful battle experience. Thus, we rarely hired mercenaries.

If the Llewynians didn't have any mercenaries in their ranks, we wanted to keep it that way. We couldn't let them meet up, so we decided to strike them down in Maynard City.

"However, if we try to take all our forces to Maynard, we'll be too slow. They'll see us coming and flee the city before we arrive," said Alan, who stealthily held my strategy notebook under the table in one

hand. "I'd like to lead five hundred men to Maynard City before that can happen. Lady Kiara should accompany me as well."

He looked over at me, and I nodded.

I figured Reggie would try to stop us, but to my surprise, he allowed it.

"Very well. We'll leave the matter to you, Alan."

Reggie immediately gave us his approval, and everyone else agreed.

There was something unsettling about how smoothly it all went, but it was swiftly decided that Alan and I would head to Maynard City.



Maynard City was a good distance away. We departed just after noon, and by the time we neared the area, the sun had already set.

We stopped just outside the city, figuring that at this distance, the enemy wouldn't find us even if they had men out on patrol. There, we went over the facts one last time.

"There are three different bands of mercenaries. That part is the same as your memories."

"Right. In that case, we can probably assume they're using these three places as their bases."

Alan, Cain, and I were forming our plans around the strategy booklet I'd made. The three of us faced one another above my little notebook, determining the points of our current location and attack route.

There was no doubt that drawing the maps had made it easier to understand and explain, but it was still so embarrassing. It got even worse when Cain added annotations of his own; his handwriting was so neat it made me want to cry.

Boy, I wish my handwriting were that nice.

Meanwhile, Alan made a small note from the side with his charcoal pen. "Shouldn't *this* be like *this*?"

The sight of it put my heart at ease. *Thank god. Alan's handwriting is dreadful!*

I smiled at Alan like he was my own personal savior, and he glared at me in return.

"Why are you in such a good mood all of a sudden?"

"Oh, it's nothing! Nothing at all! Ehehehe!"

I hid the truth so as not to hurt him. As comrades-in-bad-handwriting, I wanted the two of us to get along.

"I don't like it. What are you up to? I'm sure it can't be anything good." Alan backed away from me uneasily.

Come on, you don't have to act so repulsed by me!

“Don’t let him get to you, Miss Kiara,” Cain said, giving me a comforting pat on the head. The “little sister” treatment was both a little embarrassing and hard to protest, so I just let him have at it.

Eventually, Alan looked over at me, a little put out. “Come to think of it, we set out from Évrard half a year later in your story, don’t we? Were the mercenaries in Maynard for all that time?”

“No. At first, they accompanied the Llewynians to the royal capital, but once Évrard started raising an army, the Llewynian nobles occupying Cassia and Delphion called them back.”

If things had gone according to the RPG, Maynard would have suffered twice over.

At any rate, there were three mercenary bands stationed in the city. Each one had made their base in either large inns or the mayor’s manor. We were going to strike at those places.

This battle was going to be a bit of a pain; if we let the mercenaries get away, they would start burning down the nearby houses.

At our three-person meeting, we settled on eliminating the groups in order from largest to smallest. If the smallest band got away, there would be less damage as a result, and they wouldn’t be as much of a threat if they joined up with the Llewynian army at Cassia Castle.

“My condolences to the property owners, but the most efficient method would be to lock them inside and burn the buildings down,” Alan suggested. Now that we knew where they were located, he jumped right to the easiest strategy.

Cain gave a faint, wry smile. “We *could* do that, if it weren’t for the people inside who they’ve forced to work for them.”

If they wanted to maintain a certain quality of life, having just their fellow mercenaries around wouldn’t cut it. They likely had townspeople-turned-servants staying in each of their bases, and we weren’t in such dire straits that we had to let innocent people die.

We wanted to free Maynard City from its mercenary oppressors. Given our position, we couldn’t write off the very people we were supposed to be saving. Eventually, it would come back around and harm both Évrard and Reggie’s reputations.

Next, we explained our strategy to Alan’s knight-guards, Lyle and Chester, who were in charge of directly organizing the soldiers in this operation. They relayed our plan of action to the rest of the soldiers.

That marked the end of our break. Thus, we set out and marched the rest of the way to Maynard City.

We sent a scout to check on the current situation one last time. If all was well, we would launch an attack on our first target, the manor of Maynard City’s mayor.

In the moonlit forest, we waited for the soldiers we’d sent on

reconnaissance to return. One of them came back earlier than expected.

“What happened?” asked Lyle.

Gasping for breath, the soldier reported, “It’s terrible! Maynard is ablaze! The mercenaries set fire to the city!”

Alan immediately called for our troops to head out, then asked the soldier, “Where did the fire start?”

“A building in the middle of the city that looked to be the mayor’s manor! And a few others started near a city square to the north!”

“They must have noticed we’re here. They’re planning to make a run for it while we have our hands full putting out the fires,” Cain postulated.

Alan nodded in agreement, then began barking orders. “Let’s split into three teams. Our main squad of three hundred men will proceed to the mayor’s manor, as originally planned, and strike down the mercenaries as they’re leaving the city. To cut off their escape route, I will take one hundred other knights and stand guard at the western gate. The remaining hundred will infiltrate from the east. After that, the bulk of our forces should focus on wiping out the mercenary bands while another squad focuses on putting out the fires, taking down any mercenaries they find along the way.”

“Now we don’t have to worry about the people inside,” I muttered.

It had already taken some time for the scout to investigate the fires and come back to us. Chances were very low that we could still save any of the civilians inside the buildings, and there was no way that the mercenaries would have rescued those people themselves.

I raised my hand and said, “Once we’ve extinguished the fire at the mayor’s manor, I’ll go around the city. It should be easy enough to put out the fires with dirt.”

Alan nodded. “You take care of Kiara, Wentworth.”

While Alan and his men mounted their horses, the soldiers began to move out. Cain pulled me along by the hand and sat me down in front of him on his horse.

We weaved through the forest and headed for Maynard City.

We couldn’t charge in without our foot soldiers, so we couldn’t just gallop straight ahead. Luckily, we weren’t that far from the city, so it wasn’t long before we passed through the walls. The gates, about twice the height of an adult, had already been opened. Most likely, someone had opened them while making their escape.

Beyond the gates, smoke rose from over the roofs of buildings. Raging flames lit up the sky. We proceeded into the city, bright during these supposed hours of darkness.

On the cobblestone road, we passed by people leaving the city.

Evidently, the mercenaries took no issue with this as long as no one raised a hand against them; they didn't go out of their way to chase down and kill the escaping townspeople. All the people who had been hiding away to escape the notice of their oppressors were taking full advantage of that and running for their lives, their families in tow and their hands full of bags.

When they saw us heading in the opposite direction, toward the city center, they stopped in surprise and moved out of our path in a hurry. Surely they were hoping we would stamp out the fires and get rid of the outlaws.

Eventually, we arrived at the front entrance to the mayor's manor. The left side of the building was almost entirely enveloped in flame. I didn't see anyone still escaping from inside, and fortunately for us, the mercenaries had only just left the manor.

"Get us a little closer, Sir Cain! You can stop as soon as I throw something!"

"Just so you know, I won't take you within a sword's reach of them."

Cain met my demand, galloping ahead. Held in place by his arms, I flung a copper coin toward the mercenaries who had stopped to glance back at us.

The sound of the coin bouncing off stone echoed through the area.

When Cain brought his horse to a stop, I jumped down onto the road and touched the stone pavement. My power could reach anywhere connected to me by stone or soil.

The mercenaries changed course, preparing to come at us.

Unfortunately for them, I was faster. As soon as they broke out running, they ran straight into a stone wall of my creation, then screamed and took a tumble on the bulging cobblestone road.

"It's a spellcaster!"

"That little girl is a spellcaster!"

The mercenaries stood up and pointed at me, and the ones who hadn't fallen ran toward me in a wild frenzy. Apparently, I was very popular with the enemy. Whoever took my head would be commended, and maybe even given a reward. The idea of it sent a shiver down my spine.

The deluge of people trying to kill me was honestly pretty terrifying, but cowering in fear wasn't going to get me anywhere. Besides, I had Cain with me.

Cain left his horse to a fellow soldier who had caught up to us, dismounted, and stood in front of me. In the meantime, I did what I had to do.

The stones on the cobblestone path rapidly expanded, one by one. First they took on the shape of a rectangular shield, then they

transformed into thin humanoid figures with hands and feet.

I made twenty of those stone golems, each about the size of an adult human. If I made any more than that, I would run out of breath, so this was my limit in terms of quantity.

Under my orders, the stone dolls arranged themselves into rows and advanced toward the mercenaries.

“W-What on earth ARE those?!”

“How revolting!”

Some of the mercenaries ducked around the stone dolls and ran toward us. Each of them fell with a flash of Cain’s sword.

The rest of our soldiers caught up to us and launched an attack at the command of Alan’s knight, Lyle, taking some of the burden off of Cain.

While all that was going on, the stone golems pressed on in solemn silence. Along the way, some of them extended their slender arms, wrapping them around the nearby mercenaries. The hulking men, infinitely taller and broader than me, let out throaty, petrified screams.

I couldn’t blame them; it must have been scary. After all, they’d been seized by slender stone wraiths, marching on without expression in the flickering light of the flames. Moreover, since their captors were made of stone, any efforts to chop off the arms binding them proved useless, leaving them unable to do anything but squirm.

The other nearby mercenaries grew frightened when they caught sight of their apprehended comrades, giving our soldiers plenty of openings to take advantage of.

I had the stone golems keep up the good work. Then, I had Cain throw another copper coin far into the distance. The cobblestones there swelled up, knocking over some mercenaries in the middle of their escape.

Évrard soldiers had flocked there as well. The mercenaries had swords of their own, so our men weren’t getting by unscathed, but everyone seemed to be having an easier time of fighting than usual.

Before we knew it, we had successfully taken down all the mercenaries near the mayor’s manor.

After making sure that all the people they’d apprehended were tied up, I dismantled my stone golems, and... *Oops, looks like the cobblestone road is still all torn up. I’ll fix it later, promise!*

The captured mercenaries were handed over to the residents of the city. We left the decision of what to do with the crooks in their hands.

“I don’t see any more enemies around,” Cain said, scanning the area and sliding his sword back into its sheath.

Then, Lyle announced that he was moving to the western gate to

chase down the remaining mercenaries. Chester would lead the other half of our group to the stronghold of one of the other mercenary bands. The place he was headed for had also gone up in flames, so he was sure to end up chasing down escaping mercenaries.

I went to work to prevent the spread of the fire. I brought forth a giant golem, had it collapse on top of the burning parts of the building, covering up the fire, and then dispelled it. By the time I had repeated the process twice, the left half of the mayor's manor had caved in, smoke rising from the remains. That way, the fire wouldn't spread to the nearby properties. I nodded to myself, satisfied.

Suddenly, I felt something tug at my skirt. I looked behind me, wondering if I had caught it on something, and my eyes went wide.

A creature with pale fur was looking up at me.

It was a shaggy animal, with legs and a face slimmer than a dog's. A fox, perhaps? It definitely looked like a fox. The size of its body was about on par with a wolf.

When did you get here?

In my utter surprise, the fox and I just stared silently at each other for some time. Eventually, a nearby soldier shouted, "A-A frostfox?!"

"Is that a monster?!"

The soldiers were familiar with this creature, apparently. A murmur arose from the people who overheard their cries.

Cain stepped out in front of me. His hand was already on his sword.

However, the frostfox didn't look scared in the least; it just whined and nosed at me from behind, like it didn't want to be separated from me. As it nuzzled up against me, I thought, *Wait... Does that mean this little guy likes me?*

My heart warmed, I found myself extending a hand toward it.

"Miss Kiara, what are you doing?!" Cain tried to stop me, but the frostfox behind me submitted itself to my petting without so much as a growl.

Eventually, the frostfox once again bit down gently on my skirt and tugged at it, trying to guide me to the right.

"Is your owner over there?" I asked, but of course, the creature couldn't respond. Still, such a domesticated monster couldn't be wandering around a city all by itself.

Unsure of what to do, I looked up at Cain for guidance—and that was when I noticed smoke in the distance.

There was a fire burning in two different areas. One of the fires was to the west, the same direction in which the mercenaries staying in the mayor's manor had fled. To the north, where the frostfox was trying to lead me, several buildings were burning, and the resulting fire looked huge.

Near the eastern gate, where the third group of mercenaries was supposedly located, there were still no signs of any fire.

“Sir Cain, let’s take care of the fires to the north first,” I suggested.

The frostfox seemed appeased, releasing my skirt from its jaws. Apparently, that was exactly what it had wanted from me.

“You want us to put out the fire?”

The fox gently swayed its bushy tail, a contrast to its slender face, as if to say, *That’s right!*

“Could fighting have broken out among the mercenaries? Perhaps this frostfox’s master sympathized with the townspeople and headed to where one of the fires was started,” Cain hypothesized.

I nodded in agreement. There was no way this frostfox’s master was a regular townsperson. It had to be someone from the third mercenary group. If their frostfox was here, and there was no evidence of a fire at their base, it was a sign that they weren’t in line with the rest of the mercenaries.

“Let’s go!” I said.

Cain nodded. He thanked the soldier who had been holding onto his horse, jumped back into the saddle, and pulled me up into his arms.

The frostfox broke into a run, acting as our guide.

The source of the fire wasn’t too far away. Several houses were engulfed in flame, burning brightly enough to give off the look of twilight. On the side of the road, the owners of those houses had fallen to their knees, stunned. Nearby were the fallen, bloody corpses of those who had likely been killed in their attempts to stop the arsonists.

A little further ahead, we heard the sounds of fighting. The clang of a sword. Someone toppling to the ground.

The frostfox ran off in the direction of those noises. Cain followed close behind.

When we rounded the corner, a flurry of wind and snow hit us smack in the face, and I instinctively turned my head away.

It was freezing cold, but it was dangerous to look away. I opened my eyes and squinted, only to see a man and woman taking on over a dozen surrounding mercenaries all by themselves.

Impressively enough, they weren’t on the losing end of the fight.

The woman’s mahogany hair was tied back behind her. At her command, the two frostfoxes at her feet each conjured up a blizzard.

While their enemies shrunk back in the face of the snowstorm, her muscular companion with short-cropped hair sprang forward energetically, shouting, “Here comes Mama!”

Wait... That is a man, right?

With a feminine battle cry, the man swung down his broad,

curved blade. The oversized collar of his cape, shaped like an Elizabethan ruff, fluttered in the icy winds.

A spray of blood mixed in with the wind and snow. Three men were killed in an instant. The curved blade shimmered in the light cast by the flames once again, spilling even more blood in its wake.

One of the frostfoxes came running in from the side and froze several mercenaries' arms with its blizzard, leapt off the top of their heads like a springboard, and landed back near the mahogany-haired woman.

"Stand back, Girsch! Go on, Reynard!" commanded the woman.

The man took a step back, and another fox immediately rushed forward in his place, its body encrusted in ice.

All who came in contact with its tail groaned in pain as their legs were sliced by the sharp blade of ice. While the snowy assault escalated, the fox returned to its place behind the woman.

Despite the impressive show, it was taking the pair quite a bit of time to defeat their foes all by themselves. I dismounted our horse in a hurry, then made a golem laced with cobblestone. It was about half the size of my usual creations, but that was plenty.

The mercenaries panicked at the sudden appearance of my golem. It charged in and kicked several of the men away, sending them flying into the air. When it snatched up two of the men at its feet, they fainted on the spot. A few of the mercenaries came barreling in my direction, but Cain cut each and every one of them down.

The man and woman with the frostfoxes had successfully slain the enemies before them, too.

Once things had calmed down, I had my golem huddle around the burning houses before dismantling it. A nearby house collapsed, half-buried in the earth, and the flames subsided.

"Oh, you're going to put out the fires for us?" asked the woman controlling the frostfoxes. After a short pause, she exclaimed, "Wait, you're a spellcaster?!"

I pointed at the frostfox I'd met earlier and asked, "Are you this frostfox's owner? This little fella found us and brought us over here."

"What? Lila! What did you do with Kenneth?! I told you to look after him!" the lady demanded, seizing the frostfox by her side and bringing her face close to its nose.

The frostfox named Lila snorted, making a face that said, *What are you talking about?*

Right then, a child (presumably the Kenneth in question) leaped out from beside one of the untouched houses.

"Auntie Ginaaaaaa!"

"Kenneth!"

The woman scooped up the boy in her arms as he came running

over to her.

Wait... what? "Auntie"? No way! This lady couldn't be more than a few years older than me. Is that really her nephew?

I had plenty of questions, but most important of all was finding out if these people were our enemies.

Cain beat me to the punch and asked the woman named Gina, "Are you Llewynian mercenaries?"

Before she could answer, the man with the ruffed cape responded, "Llewyne's been paying us, but we're not loyal enough to them to care about breaking our contract. I mean, my goodness, we just made a show of killing a bunch of their other men! I'm afraid they wouldn't even take us back at this point."

Cain looked a little taken aback by the feminine lilt to the man's voice, but he nodded.

Now that we had confirmed that they weren't our enemies, we focused our efforts on putting out the fires. The mercenary duo used their frostfoxes' blizzards to aid the townspeople fleeing from the flames.

While we had been busy fighting, Alan had taken down the mercenaries fleeing to the west and prevented them from setting any more fires.

Thus, the battle of Maynard City and our firefighting escapades came to a close.

Outside the mayor's manor, which had been half-charred and eventually buried under a landslide, we met up with Alan and his men, who had subdued the remaining mercenaries.

"Mind explaining why you have monsters with you, Kiara?"

"Um... it just sort of happened? I'd like to bring along these frostfoxes' owner and her partner, too."

I introduced him to the mahogany-haired woman behind me, Gina, and the well-muscled, short-haired... but slightly effeminate man, Girsch.

"They invaded Farzia with the Llewynian army, but here in Maynard, they worked really hard to help evacuate the people of the city. They said they're mercenaries from Salekhard. Gina takes care of these frostfoxes, but the little guys don't want to leave my side, so they were hoping they could just come with us."

"I beg your pardon?!"

Alan's jaw dropped. I couldn't blame him. I hadn't seen this coming, either. My homemade strategy guide didn't say anything about recruiting mercenaries to our side.

For the record, I hadn't even solicited them.

Settled snugly around my feet was the largest of the three frostfoxes, the bushy-tailed Reynard. The little guy refused to move

from my side. When Gina had tried to peel him away from me, he'd just dug in his heels and whined like crazy. Unsure of what to do, she'd eventually just asked, "Can we come with you?" That was how we'd ended up here.

I looked over my shoulder at Cain, hoping he would explain everything, but he was busy gazing down at Reynard with a look that defied description.

"For now, let's talk things over," suggested Alan, who looked like he had a headache coming on, and we all agreed to move elsewhere.

Alan asked a few people who had wandered over at the sight of our Farzian blue capes where we could best talk in peace. We were subsequently led to a trading house. Some merchants offered to let us stay there as thanks for saving their city.

Since it had grown quite late, the rest of the soldiers left one after the other to go stay in lodgings offered by grateful innkeepers.

When morning comes, I have to remember to bury the dead mercenaries.

I was told to put our discussion first, so I had left the mercenaries' bodies to be tossed out of the city at the hands of the enraged citizens. Even some of the mercenaries we'd taken alive had been pelted with rocks or killed by townspeople who attacked now that their oppressors couldn't fight back.

When Cain had seen it happen, he'd held me close to his chest to shield me from the sight and guided us away from the scene, so I was lucky enough not to have witnessed it in gruesome detail. I knew that sort of thing was inevitable, but seeing something that felt like it belonged to a distant world happen right before my eyes was so shocking that I'd let Cain steer me away without protest.

Alan told me that if I buried the enemy while everyone was still seething with anger, I might be resented strongly enough to end up as the target of violence. Once a night had passed, things were sure to calm down a little.

Plus, he added, if we told them that the stench and disease would be bad for business, they'd realize that the pros of performing the burial outweighed the cons and give their consent. I hoped he was right.

Putting those thoughts aside, I got ready to listen to Gina's story. We borrowed a room in the trading post we were staying at, where Alan, Cain, and I sat down around a long table with the two mercenaries.

"It went like this: our country put out an official notice that all local mercenaries should join the war effort. And look at me, with these frostfoxes here! There was no way we could escape the eyes of authority and sit it out, so we came along reluctantly."

Unlike the other two mercenary groups, Gina's people were all from Salekhard, and their new king had ordered all mercenaries to take part in the war. Since they were drafted against their will, Gina and Girsch were the only two people their mercenary group bothered to send in. Their plan had been to quietly sneak back home once they finally arrived at Cassia.

However, after witnessing the horrible plunder of Maynard City, they'd started meddling here and there, striking deals with Maynard's merchant associations and using their frostfoxes' power to keep the rest of the mercenaries in check. Thus, in order to make good on their word, as well as to keep an eye on the situation, Gina and Girsch ended up stuck in Maynard.

It was then that they had received a call to Cassia Castle. Now that they had no business left with the place, the two Llewynian mercenary groups had set fire to various city buildings on their way out.

"In fairness, the fires probably doubled as a means of slowing down our forces," Alan assessed. "After all, we couldn't just pass right through and ignore the disaster."

"Agreed. You boys are fighting to save the people of your country, no? They knew you wouldn't be cold-hearted enough to leave the townspeople to burn and rush ahead to attack Cassia Castle," Girsch agreed, placing a hand to one cheek with a sigh.

Girsch was tall and well-muscled, clearly bigger than Cain when they stood side-by-side, with the look of someone born to fight... and was also one of the girliest people I'd ever met. Earlier, the mercenary had lamented that no matter how much money the job brought in, they could never wear frilly clothes out on the field, and decorating their cloaks was the best they could manage.

That amazing physique and deep, velvety voice in combination with the feminine timbre packed a real punch. I noticed the deliberate attempt to affect a higher pitch of voice, and that extra bit of effort to radiate womanhood nearly moved me to tears.

"Either way, we *had* hoped to take advantage of this opportunity to escape from Farzia. But then the stores of some people who had treated Reynard and the girls well went up in flames..."

As I was listening to Gina's story, I suddenly felt a small weight on top of my thigh. When I looked down, I saw that one of the frostfoxes had rested its head on top of my leg, where I was sitting in my chair. Reynard was already sprawled around my ankles, so this had to be Lila.

The other fox, Sara, had been by Gina's side for most of the conversation but was now sitting in a corner of the room.

The reason the duo had ended up fighting the rest of the

mercenaries was because the three foxes had grown attached to a certain child. They kept going to see the kid, who happily played with them despite the surrounding circumstances. Thus, during their stay in Maynard City, Gina and Girsch had become close to the boy and his family.

When the fires had broken out, the two mercenaries had rushed to rescue their friends. The family had managed to escape from their burning house, but the boy had been about to be killed by mercenaries when the duo had rushed in to save him. The enemy mercenaries had cursed the pair as a thorn in their side, and a fight had broken out.

“We didn’t expect the Évrard army to show up so quickly, so we did our best to stop the arson ourselves. But as you can see, we were far outnumbered. I was hoping we could let the kid escape, if nothing else, so I left Lila to look after him... but you know what happened next.”

For some reason, Lila had abandoned her task to keep the boy hidden in order to go bring me over. She was an intelligent monster, so maybe she had been aiming for two birds with one stone—getting her master some backup and helping take care of the fires.

“Our mercenary band fills out its numbers by raising orphans picked up off the street, so seeing that boy reminds us of the kids we left behind in Salekhard,” said Girsch.

“Thanks to your help, we managed to save a lot of houses from burning.” Gina smiled, relieved, but her expression became more conflicted when she looked down. “Reynard... When are you going to give this girl a little space?”

Reynard seemed unbothered by Gina’s exasperated tone.

“I wonder why he likes me so much.”

“You’re a spellcaster, so maybe it’s your mana he’s after. Whenever these little guys use up their own mana, they’re drawn to people of the same element as them.”

“Element?”

“Whether they’re a spellcaster or not, everyone has some kind of element—water, fire, earth, and so on. Monsters tend to stick to people who have the same element as them. That’s how they replenish their mana—or that’s what I heard from my master, whose frostfox-rearing techniques have been passed down for generations. My element is water, and that’s why I was able to tame these guys.”

Gina’s explanation made me think back to all the defective spellcasters I’d seen die. Each of them had manifested their magic differently. That probably reflected whatever element they were. The fact that I could use earth magic had to mean that was my element, too.

Reynard was cozying up to me to replenish his mana, apparently. If becoming a spellcaster meant that animals I'd never otherwise get to pet would take a liking to me, that seemed like a pretty good part of the deal.

"By the way, what happened to your master? He's being unusually quiet," Alan asked me. Gina mentioning her "master" must have made him think of it.

"Apparently, he has some bad memories involving foxes."

He was keeping deathly quiet and pretending to be a regular clay doll.

Unfortunately for him, it wasn't hard to detect his unusual amount of magic energy. Reynard and Lila started sniffing at him, and...

Whoops, one of them licked him.

Master Horace started vibrating like a cell phone.

"You need to get over it, Master Horace," I told him.

I untied the strap hooking him to my waist, then lifted him up, up, and away to where the foxes couldn't get to him. The ceiling to his back, the clay figurine seemed relieved to be far away from the furry menaces.

"Look here, little lady, these guys and I just don't see eye to eye! It's all their fault my back pain drove me down south—and after I went to all the trouble of involving myself in a turf war, too!"

Apparently, frostfoxes were the real reason Master Horace had to move.

"Don't be silly. It's not like these are those same foxes."

"They're all cut from the same cloth!" he declared. "This is all your fault, you wanton disciple! What're you attracting *monsters* for? Weren't all the human men enough for you? Looks like this is the one field where I have a thing or two to learn from you, mmheehee!"

I shrieked, "What?! I have no idea what you're talking about! How dare you slander me like that!"

"Hah! Go do some soul searching deep in that flat chest of yours!"

"I-It's not flat!"

It's totally average! This is the one modest joy I gained from being reincarnated, so don't you dare take that away from me!

Despite my protests, Master Horace only further fueled my anger with a grin in his voice. "Are you *suuure* about that, kid? Based on what I've felt... ghk!"

I shook Master Horace up and down like a salt shaker. Covering his mouth wouldn't work, because he didn't use his mouth to talk. Hitting him wouldn't actually hurt him, either. This was the most effective way to shut him up.

"Geh... Hrk... Wait!"

"Promise you won't say that again? No, scratch that. Promise

you'll erase it from your memory?"

"Okay, okay, okay! Ggh, I give up... Someone help..."

I ended my shakedown there. My arms were tired anyway, so I decided to let him off the hook.

Alan was looking away uncomfortably after listening to that crass conversation, so I wanted to change the topic as quickly as possible. Cain's expression hadn't changed, but his eyes were staring off into the middle distance.

I'm sorry you guys had to hear all that. I'll train my clay figurine a little better.

For a start, I gave him a warning. "Listen up. If you pick on me too much, I'm going to get rid of you! Once the war is over, I'll build a shrine somewhere called 'Master Jizo,' leave you there, and only come back to supply you with more mana from time to time. I'm sure Maya will make a LOVELY bib for you. The neighborhood kids will get such a kick out of playing around with you, too. Oh, and in case you try to wander back on your own, I'll tell everyone to put you back in your nest, so you can just rest easy!"

"What?! You'd make a public display of your own master, you ungrateful disciple?! YOU'RE the one who made me this way!"

"Revealing a maiden's secrets is a serious crime. So, what will it be?"

"Guh... Obviously I'd rather stay with you! I'm going to be by your side until the day you die!"

I'm going to be by your side until the day you die. My heart skipped a beat at the declaration.

I couldn't believe that, even for a brief moment, my heart had fluttered over a crusty old-man-turned-clay figurine, so I feigned indifference. "Very well. I suppose looking after you is the only responsible thing to do."

"Ahahaha! You two sure seem close." Gina burst out laughing at our banter. Even so, she didn't come across as a crude lady. Part of that was probably due to her good looks, but her cheerful demeanor also made it hard to get a negative impression from her.

For the record, she claimed to be twenty-three years old. That was older than I'd expected.

"So is your teacher some kind of cursed doll?" Gina asked point-blank. Master Horace slumped over; the "occult item" treatment came as a shock to him.

Grr! I think he took that worse than what I said to him. That kind of pisses me off.

I explained Master Horace's situation to Gina and Girsch... or at least the part about how I'd put his soul into a vessel I made. I didn't go into all the other details.

They both seemed impressed by what a spellcaster could do.

Alan cleared his throat and attempted to steer the conversation back on track. "Let me make sure I have this right. You want us to take you two under our wing for however long your fox stays attached to Kiara?"

Gina and Girsch exchanged glances. Then Gina said, "Sooner or later, you'll head to Trisphede to liberate the province, right? If we could have you hire us up until that point, once Trisphede is free, we'll head home to our country from there."

"We're not in it for the money here!" Girsch tacked on.

Gina leaned forward and added, "What Girsch said! You already have a spellcaster, but monsters are still good to have on your side! Their presence alone puts the enemy on the defensive! And so far, we haven't *personally* done anything to get on Farzia's bad side; all we've done for Llewyn is drag our feet and pretend to be running late, so we practically just took our deposit and ran. It's a good deal!"

"For the both of us and the frostfoxes, it's just five silver coins a day! Oh, but since this is a long-term contract, we'll make it cheap at twenty pieces of gold, no matter how many days we end up working! I'll put my all into it, I promise!"

"It's a bargain, sir!"

Gina and Girsch went hard on the self-promotion. It reminded me of the fliers full of flashy sales and advertisements I'd see at the supermarket in my past life.

Girsch tried enticing the adjacent Cain with, "Please? I'll do my best just for you, dear!" and Cain scooted away.

Alan still seemed reluctant to give his approval.

Twenty gold coins *was* a lot of money; maybe that was too high a price to keep mercenaries in our employ until Trisphede. I didn't know what the going rate was, though.

Her chin resting on my thigh, Lila let out a snort. Master Horace flinched with a clattering noise from where I'd left him on the table, and my heart skipped a beat.

Thinking back on it, it had been a while since I'd messed around with any cats or dogs. There were some of both back at Évrard Castle, so I got to play with them every now and then. The foxes of this world must have been part of the canine family, too, considering how much their fur felt like a dog's... or so I thought as I petted Lila's back.

Oh yeah. I think Alan liked dogs, too.

For a while now, he'd been stealing sideways glances at Sara, who was sitting in a far-off corner of the room. He must have really wanted to pet her, even if she technically wasn't a dog.

I whispered to Cain, who was sitting next to me. "Say, Sir Cain?"

Maybe Cain was a dog person, too. He'd been staring,

expressionlessly but intently, at where Reynard lay at my feet. When I spoke up, he jumped and turned his gaze to me.

“Is five silver coins a day higher than the typical going rate for a mercenary?”

“A bit, yes. But considering the price covers the frostfoxes, which have magic at their disposal, it’s not an unreasonable fee. Twenty gold coins to accompany us all the way to Trisphede is quite a bargain. Lord Alan’s concern is likely whether or not he can make the executive decision to bring Salekhardian mercenaries along. Besides, if he does hire them, those foxes are bound to stay glued to your side.”

True. If the frostfoxes accompanied us into battle, they would wind up coming to me to recharge their mana.

Still, if all they did was rest their chin on my leg or curl up at my feet, that seemed pretty harmless. Would having them around me cause some sort of inconvenience?

“I’m sure Lord Alan is concerned about whether His Highness would find it acceptable.”

“The prince isn’t allergic to animals or anything, is he?”

I’d seen Reggie play with dogs and cats before, so I figured that wasn’t an issue. Cain didn’t answer me, though.

Later on, Alan decided to welcome Gina and Girsch into our ranks. The fact of the matter was that skills like the frostfoxes’, which could compete against enemy magic, were hard to come by. Alan decided that if we could get our hands on that, it was worth any price.

Gina sending Lila to go whine in front of Alan (on my advice) gave him the final push.

Now that everything was settled, we finally had time to rest. Two days later, however, I received some shocking news.

“We’re not going back to Fort Clonfert?!”

Nobody told me that until we were leaving Maynard City.

Alan nodded. “Reggie and his men are launching an attack on Cassia Castle as we speak.”

Judging by his lack of reaction, Cain already knew about this.

“Why? What are we in such a hurry for?”

The two of them just dodged my question, refusing to give me a proper answer.



The reason Cassia Castle did not boast especially high walls was because of the wall surrounding the entire castle town.

If that wall was torn down, there was nothing left to do but surrender. In exchange, so long as it stood strong, the townspeople could help hold the defense. That was how Cassia had dealt with every attack on their castle until now.

For that reason, the interior of the castle wasn't particularly vast. It wasn't equipped with any of a fort's functions, so it was about the same size as any other elegant manor.

In one of the rooms designed for entertaining guests, Lord Weber, the Llewynian viscount currently occupying Cassia Castle, was kneeling before a man seated on the sofa. A blond boy with shoulder-length hair was standing behind that man, gazing intently at the grizzled viscount as he humbled himself.

"My deepest apologies for entertaining you in such a small—"

"No need for such formalities. My business here will be finished shortly. I just came to give you this."

The reddish-haired man on the sofa held out a tiny bottle, small enough to pinch between his fingertips. The sand accumulated at the bottom of the bottle was dark red in color.

"Oh my! You're giving me the spellcaster's powder?!" Lord Weber exclaimed in wonder as he looked up at the bottle.

"It's a gift from Farzia's magical viscount. The prince's army of Évrard has a spellcaster in its ranks, yes? Use this to wipe them out."

Lord Weber groveled and thanked the man most enthusiastically. "My deepest gratitude! Fort Clonfert's untimely capture had my soldiers all in a panic, and I didn't know what to do. This should make for a sufficient countermeasure!"

The viscount had been quite nervous, it seemed. The smile on his face now looked wholly genuine.

"I'll be off, then. Best of luck, viscount."

The young man stood up and made to leave, his blond lord-in-waiting by his side.

"Allow me to see you off, Your Highness!" The viscount attempted to tag along, but Isaac motioned for him to stay put.

"No need. I simply snuck in while I was in the area on some trifling business. I'd rather not make a scene of it. Also... must I remind you of my proper title?"

"My apologies, Your Majesty," Lord Weber corrected himself.

Isaac took one last look at him and left the room.

Once they'd left the castle grounds, Mikhail, who was walking a step behind his master, heaved a sigh. "If you care enough to correct the man, you ought to have held a coronation..."

Mikhail had been muttering under his breath, but Isaac heard him all the same. "What would you have me do, Mikhail? The perfect time to trounce my father and lock my brother away was right before my brother began negotiations with Farzia. Did you forget that *you* were the one who said it was the perfect time to strike? We had to rush straight into the war after that, so there was no time for a ceremony. This way, we could put Llewyn in our debt. Plus, we could get a tour

of Farzian affairs, which will be useful after we say our goodbyes to Llewynne. Once we'd taken control of Trisphede, so long as we left some fresh new soldiers there, there was no problem sending another ten thousand men off on a long expedition. You raised some very good points."

"Ughhh..."

Mikhail had indeed been the one to lend him such advice.

"Still, I'm impressed you managed to acquire more of that spellcaster's sand."

Mikhail responded indifferently, "It was quite simple, really. Who was it, again? That one viscount's men brought along two bottles when they left for Évrard, so I 'borrowed' one of them."

"What?" Isaac's jaw dropped. After a lapse of silence, he followed up with, "I didn't know you could do magic tricks."

"*That's* all you have to say after acting so surprised? I took advantage of all the commotion surrounding their departure, so it wasn't particularly hard to pull off."

Isaac chuckled. "So you'd send another man to the underworld for the sake of our own experiment?"

"All for the sake of our country. If we never watch them fail, we'll never see where their weaknesses are."

They knew the enemy had a spellcaster in their ranks. If they wanted to size her up properly, they had to make sure she would show up on the battlefield. Defective spellcasters were perfect for the job.

"You are a smart one," Isaac said with a laugh.

Mikhail muttered, "I wouldn't call myself that. It's more like 'cunning.' Why would you praise me for that? You're the one who's been dragged into all sorts of trouble, well on the way to throwing away your happiness, all because you were taken in by my silver tongue."

The boy glared at him, but Isaac didn't respond. He simply rushed ahead, thoroughly enjoying himself. However, when he heard the sound of shrieks, yells, and cheers, he came to a stop.

The noise was coming from somewhere a good distance away—one of the four gates in the wall surrounding the city.

"Aren't they here a little early?" Isaac wondered aloud.

Mikhail nodded. "Well, I suppose it's possible if they didn't stop for a proper break after Clonfert."

"What a bind. This means we can't leave, doesn't it?"

"Let's find somewhere to hide, Your Majesty. We can't let anyone notice us." Mikhail heaved a sigh. "It won't be long before the castle falls now. The citizens will let the Évrard army through the other gates, too, for the sake of driving the Llewynians out. If the young and old alike rise up waving their axes and sickles at the same time the

soldiers descend, the Llewynian soldiers stationed in Cassia won't stand a chance. This came fast enough to qualify as a surprise attack."

Évrard didn't need to set an ambush; there were already plenty of people inside who would let their soldiers in. Unprepared as they were, the Llewynians wouldn't be able to stop the invasion.

"Please, Mikhail. I don't mind hiding, but I want to witness the results of our experiment myself."

When Issac began walking off in the direction of the gate, Mikhail tugged at his cape to stop him.

"This is no time to be saying that! You're Salekhard's leader, for goodness' sake!"



Reggie was at Cassia Castle. When I first heard that, I didn't understand *why*. What was the point of attacking there at the same time as Maynard City? What were the benefits? Most importantly, was Reggie safe?

I wanted to go running right to where he was, but neither Cain nor Alan seemed to be in a hurry.

That was when I finally understood why something had felt off yesterday: we'd stayed in Maynard City for an unnecessarily long amount of time.

I was glad that everyone was so happy we'd rescued them, sure. Still, I'd assumed that we could head back as soon as I'd buried the bodies and helped clear away the remains of the burnt houses. When I'd heard we were staying one more night after that, I'd wondered why we were taking it so easy.

Oblivious as I was, I'd assumed that if we set out by morning, we would arrive at Clonfert by sunset, so I'd thought it very strange when Alan suggested we leave at noon, too.

On top of that, no one had told me where we were actually headed until Girsch asked about it.

Why had I been left in the dark about all this?

"Would a spellcaster just get in the way?" Perhaps having me there would make Reggie's strategy difficult to execute. I asked Alan about it, but he was reluctant to answer.

Then, from behind me in the saddle, Cain said, "I told you back at Clonfert, didn't I? 'Until the battle is over, I will assist you in getting wherever it is you want to go.'"

Yes, I remembered that. And I'd known that it meant he would do what I wanted *that* time around, but he made no promises about next time.

"That doesn't mean you need to keep me out of the battle altogether!"

“I’m aware it’s not a good idea to keep the spellcaster away from the battlefield, in case things go awry. But His Highness and I both knew that as long as you were nearby, you’d jump to actions neither of us could account for, so this was the plan we came up with.”

Cain confessed to his role as the mastermind without batting an eye. The two had taken steps to keep me away from the fighting.

“You are our one and only spellcaster, as indispensable as the prince himself. What’s more, His Highness needs to prove that we can win battles even without your help. We want you to understand that there’s no need to strain yourself to protect us.”

I bit down on my lip. I understood what they were trying to do, and there was nothing I could do about it. I couldn’t use my magic to fly straight to Cassia Castle, so the best I could do was ask Cain to hurry up.

Cain claimed that he and Reggie had resorted to this method because I wouldn’t listen to them otherwise. They wanted to show me that things could turn out fine even if I didn’t go nuts so that I would do as they said and stay where it was safe.

Still, I was just as worried about them as they were about me.

If something happened, swords and arrows alone might not be enough to deal with it. Why did they refuse to utilize me to protect themselves?

It was especially bad for Reggie. Just when I’d thought he was safe, he was nearly killed the same way as in the RPG. For all I knew, the same thing could keep happening over and over until he finally died.

While we were camping out, anxiety ate away at me, keeping me from getting any sleep. I knew that if I could just make it through the night, we would arrive at Cassia Castle tomorrow afternoon, but it was hard to fight down the part of myself that wanted to keep pushing onward through the dark.

Maybe my fretting had made it hard to sleep. Gina was staying with me inside an earthen hut I’d made, since we were both girls, and she woke up in the middle of the night and helped me to calm down.

“You know what? When I first met you, I was really shocked. I didn’t think such a young girl could be a spellcaster.”

Gina sat down next to me where I was hugging my knees, her blanket wrapped snugly around her. When I caught a whiff of her sweet, flowery perfume, I felt myself relaxing a little.

Thinking about it, our whole army was nothing but men. Before I knew it, I’d gotten used to the smell of blood on the battlefield drowning out everything else, but her gentle scent reminded me of what I’d been missing all this time.

Pushed over the edge by my own sentimentality, perhaps, I let

myself whine, “Having such a teensy girl for a spellcaster doesn’t inspire much confidence... does it?”

Was that why Reggie and Cain tried so hard to protect me?

When she saw me getting down on myself, Gina panicked.

“What?! No, no, I didn’t mean it like that! Um... hey, just look at me! How many female mercenaries have you heard of? Plus, I’m not that great with a sword, and the only reason I’m useful at all is because a bunch of frostfoxes took a liking to me!”

“But you’re an adult, and you seem so well put together.”

It seems like she talks with her partner on equal footing, too, I thought to myself. Then Reynard, the only one of the frostfoxes sitting next to me, plunked his chin on my foot and stretched out. It was getting a bit too warm for comfort, but it soothed my heart to have an animal silently snuggle up to me.

“Oh, I don’t know about that. Girsch is always needling me like a second mother. ‘Gina, dear, are you slacking off on your sword practice?!’ You know, things like that.”

I felt bad making Gina work so hard to console me, so I just dropped the subject.

“Did you become a mercenary after taking in Reynard, Lila, and Sara?”

Honestly, it felt like some kind of mistake that such a beautiful woman had ended up a mercenary. If this were a manga, I could see her as an “elegant warrior” type, but it wasn’t something I’d expected to see in real life.

The moment I thought that, I should have realized there had to be a good reason for it. Unfortunately, it didn’t occur to me until Gina smiled uncomfortably, like it was a difficult subject for her.

“Oh, sorry! I didn’t mean to, um...”

“No, it’s fine. It’s not anything I’m desperate to hide. The truth is, I’m the daughter of a Salekhardian noble. Since I’m from a branch estate, I was able to live pretty freely... until there was a bit of a dispute over marrying me off. Then I missed my window for marriage, and none of it mattered anymore.”

In both Salekhard and Farzia, the marriageable age for a woman was between sixteen and twenty. If it weren’t for those complications, there was no way Gina would still be single.

“I didn’t want to be a burden on the family, so I decided I’d get by on my own. I already knew Girsch and a few of the other mercenaries, so I asked them to let me join their group.”

Gina fixed her eyes on me after she finished telling her story.

“Why did you become a spellcaster, Kiara? I heard that your master nearly died, and you turned him into that doll. Were you training to become his disciple ever since you were a child?”

I'd never explained the process of becoming a spellcaster to Gina. After some deliberation, I told her, "I was afraid a friend of mine might die. That's why I became a spellcaster."

I'd wanted to save Reggie and the others. At the time, I really hadn't been thinking about anything but the people close to me. I had never imagined that I would end up killing thousands of people as a consequence of my decision.

That was the problem. Because I hadn't been prepared for what it would take, because I'd made the mistake of admitting how much I hated killing people... Reggie and Cain had taken pity on me and gone ahead with their plan.

I was nearly lost in thought when Gina said, "Oh, so *that's* why everyone cares so much about you. They all really love you, don't they?"

"They what...?"

"Isn't that right? You worked so hard to keep your loved ones from getting hurt or sad, so now those knights want to keep *you* out of danger as much as possible."

I understood the feeling. I felt the same way every time Reggie and the others tried to protect me, too.

Still, I didn't want things to be so one-sided. No matter how much I wanted to keep them safe, they always hated it when I protected them. They wouldn't let me do anything to help them.

"I just want for us to protect each other. You look out for Reynard, and Reynard looks out for you, right? That's the kind of dynamic I want."

Gina blinked. "So you want them to trust you more?"

"I don't think they really believe in me, that's all."

They knew what I was capable of, and they knew how useful I could be to them, but it was like they didn't want to acknowledge it.

"I see. You both want different things, then. You know, I've been on the receiving end of that, too. When there's someone you don't want to lose, you just want to hide them and protect them from all danger, I guess. And I'm a woman, too. The stronger I got, the more that kind of thing hurt my pride. Well, maybe he just cared so much about me that he didn't know how to handle it."

They cared about me. Gina's words rang true. The issue was simply that the way they expressed that was too one-sided for my tastes.

Maybe it was selfish of me to think that, when they were going out of their way to protect me. Still, I couldn't help feeling like they'd left me out in the cold.

The next day, I couldn't help myself. I urged Cain and the rest of the knights to hurry.

When we arrived at Cassia Castle and its castle town, the attack had likely just begun; the place was in an uproar.

However, it seemed the victor was already decided.

According to what Alan and the others finally revealed to me, even if the day of the assault had been pushed back, Reggie had firm plans to launch his attack during the afternoon.

Two of the gates in the walls surrounding the town had already been opened. Not only that—the ones standing guard there were Évrard soldiers.

After we headed in through the gate, I chewed on my lip as I observed the state of the town, marked by the remnants of battle. The side of the road was littered with Llewynian soldiers run through with spears and arrows. Occasionally, bodies of the townspeople were mixed in with them. Most likely, their desire to drive out the Llewynians had been so strong that they'd picked up weapons of their own and teamed up with the Évrard soldiers.

I was shaken by the sight, but I couldn't let myself get too upset. It wasn't time to mourn the fallen yet. Besides, if I started crying, people would think I was weak. As I told myself that, my distress gradually subsided.

After heading further into the town, we eventually met up with the soldiers standing outside Cassia Castle, Edam among them.

However, there was no sign of Reggie.

"Where is His Highness?"

Edam responded with a conflicted expression. "His Highness took a shortcut. He's breaking into the castle as we speak."

Side Story: Dreaming Under the Sunbeams

The bell rang, but it was different from the usual clang of the bell tower. It was a much simpler, high-pitched electronic sound.

I kept scribbling away with my mechanical pencil.

Someone called out to me, “Hey, I’m heading out, Chisa!” A pause followed. “Wait, isn’t that tomorrow’s homework?”

“Yeah. I want to get it out of the way now so I can relax and play video games for the rest of the day. I hate bringing homework home with me. I’ll see you later, okay?”

I despised lengthy homework assignments because it meant I had to work on them at home. One- or two-page handouts were the best. I could finish them up quickly, stick them in my textbook, and leave them at school. It made my bag lighter, too, so it was a win-win.

I wrote as fast as I could. At the very end, I double-checked that I had written my name on it.

Chisato Suzushiro.

As I read my name, I cocked my head slightly.

“Wait, was this always my name? I was sure there was a ‘K’ in there somewhere.”

Something felt strangely off about it, but the sensation only lasted a second. I forgot about it quickly enough as I grabbed my bag and rushed out of the classroom.

My middle school’s building was pretty old, enough that they had plans to renovate it soon after I was set to graduate. From there, it was a twenty-minute walk back to my place.

I lived in a house with an orange, triangular roof. It was small and had been built a fairly long time ago, but coming home to the familiar place put me at ease.

My parents weren’t home yet. I got changed in my room, then set up camp in front of the TV in the living room, turning both it and the game console on.

A beautiful image popped up on the screen, which was even bigger than me.

The moment I saw the title, *Farzia: Kingdom at War*, my consciousness faded.



Before I knew it, a wasteland spread before my eyes, clouds of dust dancing in the air. I looked ahead of me, so exhausted I could barely stay standing.

Beyond the broken stone gate was a golem three times the size of a person. It collapsed to the side, kicking up a storm of dust. One of its legs had crumbled, leaving it unable to stand.

After hitting the ground with an earth-shaking thud, the golem crumbled away completely and turned into a mountain of dirt.

Countless soldiers showered in the blood of their enemies came running past it, and leading the pack was a dark-haired young man swinging his sword.

My eyes were fixed on him.

His blue cloak flapped in the strong wind. His blue eyes were focused on me, narrowed and filled with bloodlust.

The moment I accepted that I was going to die, for some reason, tears nearly came to my eyes.

It's finally over.

I couldn't help smiling. When the young man saw that, he snarled, "What are you smiling about?!"

The sight of it had offended him, it seemed. That was fine; it didn't make a difference to me if the soon-to-be-king despised me or not.

"Damned queen's spellcaster... After aiding an enemy country and crushing your fellow countrymen like ants under your feet, what could you possibly have to smile about?!"

The young man held his sword at the ready, absolutely furious. From behind him, a silver-haired girl reached out a hand to stop him.

"It's not wise to kill a spellcaster, Alan. I told you I'd take care of it, didn't I?"

"What do I care?! *She* did it... It was all because of her!" Alan growled through clenched teeth. He shook off the silver-haired girl's hand and glowered at me with a fiendish expression.

"You murderer! Don't you have anything to say?!"

The tip of his sword came straight for me.

So I'm going to die by this man's sword, I thought.

I felt bad that I'd put him through so much pain, and something like regret washed over me—regret that I hadn't accepted my death sooner.

In the end, I reflexively shut my eyes for fear of the pain, and...



I woke up. The sound of people's voices and rustling leaves snapped me back to reality.

"Did I doze off?"

Glancing around, I saw that I was somewhere outside Maynard City's walls. It was a graveyard for Maynard citizens, a little ways down the carriage-traveled road.

The day after the battle in the city, I'd helped out with the burial of the townspeople. After all, more people had died in Maynard City than just the victims of the previous day's scuffle. Everyone was already exhausted from dealing with the aftermath of the fires and the accompanying labor. I knew it would be hard on them to dig a bunch of holes, so I offered to lend a hand.

There weren't as many people to bury as there usually were on the battlefield.

Still, it wore me out. When he had seen I was unsteady on my feet, Cain had suggested that I sit down by a tree. There, I'd nodded off... and gotten lost in a daydream.

Perhaps I was so tired because I'd buried all the enemy soldiers after threatening the townspeople with potential disease from "unhygienic conditions." Or was the problem that I'd helped rebuild all the houses that were destroyed in the fires?

More accurately, I'd *tried* to help with the rebuilding, but it hadn't gone very well. I was a complete architectural amateur. Going around piling up stone walls without any regard for foundation or wall thickness had hurt more than it helped.

The carpenter had been hesitant to tell off the spellcaster himself, so in a game of telephone, he'd told a soldier, who'd told a knight, who'd told Cain, who'd told me that he wanted me to back off. My own ineptitude was discouraging, to say the least.

"Gee, it's been a while," I muttered as I hazily reflected on the dream.

The first dream had been of my past life. I'd hated doing homework at home, for sure, and coming home to an empty house because both my parents were working had felt nostalgic. I definitely remembered lazily playing video games in the living room when no one else was home.

"But the next dream..."

I had dreamed I was killed by Alan, as Kiara.

I felt my recollection of it getting hazier by the second, perhaps out of fear. Yet I couldn't forget the look in Alan's eyes in the dream. They'd been filled with ferocious malice, enough that just remembering it sent a shiver down my spine.

Truthfully, I'd never been scared of Alan until now—even knowing that one wrong step would have seen me killed at his hand.

When we first met, he was younger than his game sprite, so it was hard to imagine him as the same person who might one day kill me. We'd gotten to know each other after that, and seeing as I had begun

to walk a different path from my game counterpart, I assumed things would turn out fine. Eventually, I'd stopped thinking about it altogether.

"So why now?"

It was weird to get scared over a dream, considering I hadn't even felt that way when we actually met.

The images in my dream had felt so real, too. And the Thorn Princess had been there.

The things Alan had said implied he'd lost someone precious to him. In his rage, he had brushed off the Thorn Princess when she'd tried to stop him and then had come at me with his sword.

Who had dream-Alan lost?

If it was someone close to Alan, maybe it was one of his knights. Or... it didn't seem particularly plausible, but maybe he'd fallen in love with a girl he met on his journey, and that girl had been crushed by my golem?

Either way, I sure was sleepy. I felt ready to doze off again... but I realized that if I went back to sleep, I might see a continuation of my last dream, so I rubbed my eyes. I knew it was just a dream, but I still wouldn't enjoy seeing myself get killed by someone I'd come to think of as a friend.

"If you'd like to get some more sleep, shall I take you back?" someone asked, and I looked up to my right.

Cain was standing there, looking down at me.

He was the one who had prompted me to sit down, so it made sense that he was there, but I sure hoped he hadn't been waiting there the whole time for me to wake up.

Now I feel bad...

But I couldn't have him take me to the inn. If I went back to my room, the drowsiness would overtake me and I'd fall right back asleep. In fact, I'd be out like a light by the time he got me on his horse.

I didn't want to be subjected to another dream of Alan glaring me down with those hateful eyes. I knew he would never really do that, of course. More than anything, I would feel guilty my brain had conjured up the image and have a hard time looking him in the eyes.

"Erm, I'd rather not go back yet. Give me a chance to wake up a little..." I trailed off into a yawn.

I hid my mouth in a hurry, but Cain saw it all. He looked off to the side like he was holding back a laugh, and his shoulders shook for a few seconds.

"You seem awfully tired."

"Hrk... Yes. I am feeling strangely sleepy. It's not like we were camping out last night, either. I wasn't even feeling this tired after the battle at Clonfert..." Another yawn. After the second time, it seemed

useless to try and cover them up.

“Why don’t you sleep a little while longer? I’ll watch over you.”

“But I can’t go back to sleep,” I fussed.

Cain sat down next to me. “Did you have a bad dream?”

“Huh?”

I blinked. I hadn’t said anything yet; how had he figured it out?

The question must have shown on my face. Cain smoothly volunteered, “You had the same look on your face my little brother did whenever he had a bad dream.”

Cain’s brother had died before he’d even reached the age of ten. *Does that mean I act just like a little kid?*

That was a hard pill to swallow. Master Horace, always by my side, started snickering.

When my lips twisted into a pout, Cain chuckled. “Once, a long time ago, my brother told me he was scared to sleep, too. There had been a brawl outside the castle, and someone was killed as a result of it. The shock of witnessing someone die for the first time had devastated him.”

“Oh no...”

That would definitely have an impact, even for an adult.

Of course, maybe it was an issue of civilization at large. In this world, it wasn’t strange to see someone collapse on a street corner, and that sort of thing was an everyday occurrence in the more unruly parts of the country.

“He was kindhearted, just like you. He knew violence didn’t suit him, so he never went anywhere fighting might break out. He never watched many fencing matches, either, so he wasn’t used to the sight of swords. Mother and Father both knew that there was no hope of him becoming a knight, even once he got older, so they were planning to put him on the path of a civil servant... but of course, he never had the chance to take the first step.”

Cain’s little brother had been lost in Llewynne’s previous invasion. Cain had been thirteen at the time, and he had already been serving Alan at the castle. He had been part of the troops fighting against the Llewynians, and he hadn’t had the chance to check on his family until after the battle had ended.

Clara had been the one who’d informed him that they were lucky just to have found the bodies.

Still, it was rare for Cain to talk about his family at length. I listened carefully to his story.

“I was always looking after my younger brother, so everyone assumed I was used to dealing with children. I believe that’s why I was given the role of Lord Alan’s escort... but he was the exact opposite of my brother. Lord Alan was dense in a way that made him

particularly suited to knighthood. I was shocked that His Lordship would have Lord Alan accompany him to sweep out the Llewynians, considering how young he was, but Lord Alan didn't show the slightest hint of fear himself."

Yeah, that sounded like Alan alright.

If he were someone more easily affected by death, he wouldn't be able to lead the charge on the battlefield. *Wait, but wasn't Alan about nine years old during the first Llewynian invasion?*

Lord Évrard was clearly trying to get Alan accustomed to war, but that was still awfully Spartan of him. It was true that forcing him to adapt would raise his chances of survival, I supposed, so maybe that was just his own way of expressing his love for his child.

"The only child with even less hesitance to kill than Lord Alan was His Highness."

"Huh? Reggie fought, too?"

"He accompanied the king to the battlefield. I believe His Highness was thrust into even harsher conditions. He was near the front lines most of the time."

"But... why?"

To fulfill his role as commander of the troops, the king should have been at the rear, surrounded by soldiers. If anything, Reggie's behavior at Fort Clonfert and the hills of Dilhorne was an exception to the rule—though according to him, that was because direct action was needed to coordinate all the troops from various provinces. Wasn't the prince generally supposed to stay in a safe place?

Plus, Reggie would have been the same age as Alan—nine years old. I knew Reggie wasn't fond of the king, and it clearly went both ways; it sure sounded like the king had been using the opportunity to try and kill off his son.

Groul must have had a tough time.

"In the midst of the fight, His and Her Lordship decided they could no longer abide by it and took His Highness back to the castle. It was after that that he began keeping company with Lord Alan."

The couple must have thought it was too much for any child to bear.

"But wow... I never would've imagined they were fighting from such a young age."

"Both Lord Alan and His Highness were destined to head into battle eventually. Why, Lord Alan even demanded we 'let him at 'em,' and refused to hear anyone advise him otherwise. He insisted on going out in my stead so that I could go look for my family."

I was nearly moved to tears. *Alan was such a good kid...*

However, Cain followed up matter-of-factly, "Even if I wanted to go search for them, they were likely to be on the opposite side of the

battlefield. There was no point in looking until the fight was over. I told Lord Alan not to be so foolish, and when he tried to rush out of his own accord, I stuffed him into a burlap sack and locked him up in his room.”

Cain was unexpectedly rough when it came to Alan. Maybe men were just like that with each other? Lady Évrard was something else for allowing it, too. Oh, Maya and Clara were both pretty gutsy themselves. Had everyone just been influenced by Her Ladyship?

“Before you feel too impressed, in Lord Alan’s case, he simply wanted an excuse to go fight.”

“What? Don’t be silly! He wouldn’t think to suggest it unless he’d really been thinking of you.”

“Whatever you say, Miss Kiara.”

The edges of Cain’s mouth lifted in a smile, and he patted me on the head lightly, bouncing his hand off the top of my hair. The way the motion came so naturally to him really highlighted his “older brother” vibe.

Was he trying to distract me because he didn’t want to talk about it in-depth? Or had he really not given it too much thought, so he didn’t want me getting worked up about it? It was hard to tell.

His reaction reminded me of Reggie, somehow.

“If you were Alan’s escort, does that mean you were like an older brother to him?”

If they’d picked Cain because he had a younger brother, that was probably what the Évrards had been hoping for. Hence why they wouldn’t comment on him stuffing Alan in a burlap sack.

“I don’t know how Lord Alan feels about it. I believe he just sees me as his nagging watchdog.”

I wasn’t so sure about that. I got the sense that somewhere deep down, Alan really relied on Cain. To me, it looked like he really cared for the knight.

“Were you also a big brother figure for Reggie?”

“I would be honored if he thought so, but he was quite precocious from an early age. I never had much to teach him. Rather, Lord Alan was the one who taught him the kinds of mischief befitting a child his age.”

And it was Cain’s role to scold them, apparently.

However, he was suddenly reminded of something. “Oh, wait. There was one thing I managed to teach him.”

“What was it?”

“How to hold an animal.”

How to hold an animal? That seemed a bit random, at first. But apparently, Reggie had never had the chance to pick up an animal at the royal palace.

This story was from before Cain had started serving Alan. Cain had come to the castle with his mother to deliver something to his father. There, in an otherwise empty area, he caught Reggie staring at a sleeping dog. Cain was nine at the time. Reggie was five.

The boy was well-dressed, so Cain assumed he was the son of a nobleman—but little did he know that this was the prince himself. He had witnessed everyone's rough handling of the little rascal Alan, so he didn't hesitate to call out to the boy. He told him that it wasn't safe to walk around unattended and that he would be better off going back inside the manor.

Then, Reggie said he wanted to pet the dog—but he didn't know the right way to do it, so he'd just sat there watching it. According to what Cain heard, the boy had never been allowed to own a pet. The closest he ever got was petting a horse during his horseback riding lessons.

Yeah, horses are a little too big to make a good substitute for a dog.

Cain figured he could just show the boy how to pet a dog and then take him back to his parents, so he explained how it was done. He told him the proper way to touch a dog without scaring it, and how to pick one up without hurting it.

"For a while after that, he went around petting various animals and picking them up with the most serious look on his face. When Her Ladyship caught sight of it, she clamored about how cute it was, swept up both His Highness and his animal companions in her arms, and spun them around."

I had to agree with Lady Évrard on that one. Young Reggie must have been as cute as an angel. If he was hugging a small animal on top of that, it was no wonder she couldn't withstand the urge.

"It must have been awfully cute... I wish I could have seen it myself," I said, accidentally letting my thoughts slip out.

Cain looked at me with eyes half-lidded. Something in his gaze made my heart skip a beat. He'd been thinking back on fond memories of Reggie, so that probably explained the tender look in his eyes.

"That's about all I've done for His Highness. The rest was all him and Lord Alan getting into trouble like the children they were, provoking me into chasing them around."

"I'm sure Reggie just wanted to take full advantage of having a big brother around! Lucky... I always wanted an older brother."

"You've never had siblings?"

"In this life, I technically have a half-brother... but I barely know him, so it doesn't feel much like having a sibling. In my past life, I was an only child. I think it would've been more fun for me to have a brother back then."

If I'd had siblings, my past life would have had a slightly different

flavor to it. Would we have fought over who got the TV to play video games, though? That could've made my life a little more difficult.

"Were you lonely without siblings?"

"I wasn't *lonely*, no. It was a more peaceful world. I'd go to school every day, talk about totally inconsequential things with my friends..."

I was overwhelmed with a sense of nostalgia. It was a peaceful life I could never go back to—but that life was giving me strength here and now.

"Do you ever want to revisit the world of your past life?"

"If I could, I would. But I'm not Chisato anymore; I'm Kiara."

"Chisato?"

"That was my old name."

Come to think of it, I'd never told him what my past self had been called.

For whatever reason, Cain flashed a mirthful smile. "Well then... Lord Alan has no more need for a brother figure, so if you'd like, I could become *your* older brother instead."

Cain stood up and offered me a hand.

"If Miss Chisato didn't have one either, it means I'd be your one and only brother figure."

There was something incredibly flustering about hearing him say "one and only." Thus, I hesitated to take his hand... but then Cain got a mischievous glint in his eyes.

For a brief moment, I prepared myself for the worst, but I relaxed when he patted me on the head.



To my chagrin, it was always hard to object when he treated me like a little girl. It made me think back to my past-life mother, putting me in a pensive mood... and that was when he got me.

“Eep!”

He scooped me up into his arms and lifted me off the ground. I shrunk in on myself in surprise. As he stared down, our noses nearly touching, Cain’s mouth quirked up into a faint smile.

“This is exactly what I taught His Highness about animals: if you wait until they’ve let their guard down, it’s much easier to pick them up. It’s similarly effective on children, and I see it’s quite effective on you, too, Miss Kiara.”

Wait, does that mean he’s giving me the animal treatment?! The worst part is that I can’t say he’s wrong!

“Not so sleepy anymore, are you? Let’s go back.”

Cain began briskly walking ahead, still holding me in his arms. He was right that I’d shaken off my drowsiness, but it was SUPER embarrassing to be carried like this when I was neither unconscious nor incapacitated.

“P-Put me down, please!”

“I’m about to mount you on my horse, so it wouldn’t make sense to put you down now. Just be still.”

Cain sat me down on his horse, then stroked the top of my head as I pouted. It made it seem like he was humoring a childish tantrum of mine, and the desire to protest once again withered inside of me. I felt so utterly defeated that tears nearly came to my eyes.

Still, there was something oddly familiar about this feeling.

Who else would console me the moment I got angry, forcing me to drop the argument? Reggie. It was exactly the same trick Reggie always used.

When I made that connection as I was shaken about on horseback, it dawned on me.

Cain really *was* Reggie’s stand-in brother. He’d taught Reggie far more than how to handle animals.

Perhaps thanks to that realization, or perhaps because of all the time we’d spent talking, even as I remembered it, dream-Alan’s spiteful glare no longer felt so scary to me. I accepted that it was a mere product of my imagination—not reality.

Still, I couldn’t help thinking that if Cain were ever killed... maybe that’s what would drive Alan to that sort of rage.

Afterword

It's Kanata Satsuki again! Thank you for reading *I Refuse to Be Your Enemy! Volume 2*. The successful publication of the sequel is all thanks to the support of my lovely readers.

In this volume, the main character Kiara heads out to the battlefield and fights all over Farzia.

Mentally, Kiara is still a modern Japanese girl. Murder is upsetting and unsettling to her, but she can't come up with an alternative, so she fights on to protect the people she loves. The people she wants to keep safe have their own circumstances and feelings on the matter, and that's where romantic feelings and all sorts of other emotions come into the mix.

As she fights and works to win people over to her side, Kiara will slowly but surely come to terms with her feelings. Or at least that's the plan.

In this volume, I made a lot of edits and additions to what was originally published online. The changes are pretty significant compared to the first volume. I'd wanted to add more narration and dialogue exploring Kiara's relationships with Reggie and Cain, so I'm really pleased that I got to touch things up for the print version. Here's hoping my readers are happy with the changes, too!

Moving on, I'd like to thank my editor, who went to all sorts of trouble for me again.

Oh, and I got to put a golem on the volume cover! Hooray! A big thanks to my illustrator, Mitsuya Fuji. I asked for Kiara's golem and clay figurine to be on the cover, but then I got a little worried that it wasn't such a great idea and that maybe someone should've stopped me. Luckily, it didn't detract from Reggie and Cain's studly looks at all, and it turned out to be an absolutely lovely illustration. I'm eternally grateful! The adorable clay figurine in the insert illustration brings a smile to my face every time I look at it. Kiara's new dress looks lovely, too!

I'd also like to thank the editing department at Shufu to Seikatsu Sha—the proofreaders, the printers, and everyone else who helped get this book published. And finally, I'd like to extend my gratitude to all my dear readers.

For your further reading pleasure, I will be posting short stories related to this work on both my blog and *Shousetsuka ni Narou's I*

Refuse to Be Your Enemy! page. I hope you enjoy those as well!

—Kanata Satsuki, January 2016

Bonus Short Story

Maya's Close Encounter of the Doll Kind

Kiara had returned. Maya heard as much while she was dashing around atop the castle walls.

"Maya, go to Kiara! I can take care of Vayne!"

"At once, milady!"

Once she had climbed down from the castle walls and into the courtyard, Maya parted ways with Beatrice and headed for the gates. Évrard's courtyard was normally a very spacious area, but it was currently packed to the brim with evacuees from the town. That meant she had to waste time taking the long way around.

But along the way, a path suddenly opened up for her. At the end of it was Prince Reginald, cradling Kiara close to his chest.

Kiara was pale, dangling limply in his arms. She'd lost consciousness, apparently.

Maya nearly screamed, afraid that she had been grievously injured—or even worse, killed. "Kiara?! Is she alright?!" Maya shouted before she could stop herself.

Reginald nodded. "Don't worry. She only passed out from exhaustion. Can I leave her with you?"

"Certainly, Your Grace! I'll take good care of her!"

Maya took Kiara from Reginald, carrying the girl in her arms. The prince's and Alan's knights held out their own hands, offering to take over the task, but Kiara was so light that it was hardly an issue.

Even now that she had come of age, Kiara was so small compared to Maya that she practically seemed like a little girl. If Maya hadn't witnessed this fragile child defending Évrard and its castle with her own two eyes, she wouldn't have believed it.

"Focus on tending to your own wounds first. There's no telling when they may strike again," Maya insisted, rushing into the manor with Kiara in her arms.

With the help of a servant, she changed Kiara into a nightgown and wiped the dirt from her limbs, her hair, and her face. Kiara didn't so much as stir as Maya worked to get her dressed. Surely she had just fallen into a dreadfully deep sleep, but it was rather unnerving that she showed no signs of waking whatsoever.

After laying her down on the bed and pulling up the covers, Maya opted to stay and watch over Kiara for a while. The girl was running a

slight fever, but she was fast asleep at the moment, so there wasn't much Maya could do for her.

Thus, Maya decided to pass the time by tidying up.

She started with the outfit Kiara had been wearing. The clothes were borrowed, so she just had to wash and return them; she folded them up and set them aside.

Next came Kiara's luggage. Several items had been stuffed inside a small rucksack. Maya emptied it of its contents... and was petrified for a few brief seconds.

What on earth was this doll supposed to be? It felt like unglazed pottery to the touch. The eyes of the reddish-brown statue were freakishly large; in fact, they looked almost like last-minute add-ons. The head-to-body ratio was far too small, and there was a strange pattern all over its body.

Maya didn't find it the least bit cute, yet the shape and pattern were so bizarre they bordered on novel, giving it an almost fascinating quality.

As she held it in both hands and stared, entranced, she got the feeling the doll had turned its head ever so slightly to the side.

"Hm?"

She kept a close eye on it after that, but it showed no more signs of movement.

"Was I just seeing things? Setting that aside, I wonder if this doll belongs to Kiara. Though it's hardly something I'd expect a girl to own..."

It didn't look like something you would *willingly* decorate your room with.

Thus, Maya wondered if it might have belonged to someone else. After a servant came in carrying a pitcher of water, Maya asked her to stay in the room and then left to go find the doll's owner. She figured it made the most sense to ask Wentworth, who had been accompanying Kiara, so she went looking for him straightaway.

On the stairs, she passed Felix and Lyle, Reginald and Alan's respective knights, both of whom shot startled glances at the doll she was holding. She could hardly blame them. Neither of them had been with Kiara earlier, so it was their first time laying eyes on the thing, and they had no idea where it had come from.

Maya found Wentworth in no time.

She never would have guessed it, but was there a chance it actually belonged to *him*? If so, it meant she had new material to tease him with. Her excitement building, she asked, "Is this yours, Sir Wentworth?"

"Ah..."

Wentworth averted his gaze, wearing the look of someone who

had just seen something they wished they hadn't. Maya could have sworn she felt the doll vibrate, but there was always the possibility her hands had just twitched, so she couldn't be sure.

He answered her almost apologetically, "It's somewhat difficult to explain. The doll belongs to Kiara, so you ought to ask her for the details."

"My, so it truly *is* Kiara's."

She had always found the girl a little odd, sure, but she hadn't imagined her taste in dolls would be equally strange. Thinking back on it, Maya had attempted to bequeath one of her own dolls to Kiara in the past, but the girl had politely turned her down.

I see... So it's because it wasn't to her tastes. Looking down at the doll in her hands, everything suddenly made a lot more sense to Maya.

"So *this* is what Kiara likes..."

Maya looked carefully at the doll one last time. Knowing now that it was one of Kiara's things, she decided to leave it somewhere in her room. Kiara's tastes were beyond her comprehension, but perhaps to her, this doll was a comforting sight.

Bearing that in mind, she neatly set the statue on top of the fireplace.



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I Refuse to Be Your Enemy! Volume 2

by Kanata Satsuki

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